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Saekisan
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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

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Yuuta Kadowaki
Chitose Shirakawa
Amane Fujimiya
Mahiru Shiina
Itsuki Akazawa

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“Go ahead! Enjoy your meal!”
“It’s all fine. I tasted everything as we went.”
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“W-well…if you’re going to laugh, just laugh, okay?”
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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Itsuki Akazawa

One of Amane's few friends.
A cheerful young man who gets along with anyone he meets.
Head over heels for his girlfriend, Chitose.

Chitose Shirakawa

Itsuki's girlfriend.
A lively, spirited young woman.
Likes practical jokes and often picks on Amane.

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten, Vol. 3

Saekisan

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER * COVER ART BY HANEKOTO

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Afterword

Chapter 1

The Start of the New Semester

"Listen, I'm not a kid anymore, you know." Amane's exasperation was obvious from the way he answered his mother's phone call. He was about to attend the school entrance ceremony that marked the start of his second year of high school, after all.

Amane couldn't decide whether he was more impressed or irritated by her ability to time her call for the one free moment in his busy morning routine. *She worries too much*, he thought as he sank into the sofa.

His mother had gotten used to the idea of him living alone, but she was clearly still concerned that an old wound of his might have opened again, dredging up memories of something from his second year of middle school.

As far as Amane was concerned, though the scar ached sometimes, it never bothered him much. And more importantly, he didn't want to worry his parents.

"I'm fine. Really—I'll be all right on my own."

"You come tell me anytime it gets tough, okay? Oh, even better, you can lean on Mahiru-chan!"

"Yeah, yeah…"

Why is she so hung up on Mahiru and me?

His mother had taken a liking to Mahiru and clearly wanted them to spend more time together, but Amane felt like it was really none of her business. When it came to matters of romance, he didn't ask for or want any parental meddling, even if she only meant well.

Most of all, Amane didn't want his mother to figure out just how fond of Mahiru he really was, so he opted to keep quiet and didn't engage.

"I bet Mahiru-chan would be very receptive."

"Uh-huh…"

"At any rate, if you're having a rough time, make sure to ask someone for help, okay? It can be anyone. I still think Mahiru-chan would be just perfect, but—"

"Look, I've gotta go soon, so I'm hanging up. Thanks for worrying about me so early in the morning."

Amane didn't want his mother speculating about his relationship with Mahiru any further, so he quickly thanked her and ended the call. He could already imagine her on the other end of the line, probably pouting in displeasure.

She was concerned about him, but she was worrying way too much.

His scars did ache, but not so much that it would bring him to his knees.

Besides, it wouldn't bother him if he just didn't think about it.

...Better to not reach out if I don't need to.

As long as the people I trust stay with me, everything'll be fine.

Amane wasn't worried about the class changes for the new semester. After all, there was nothing he could do, so he'd decided to do his best to accept whatever came.

Staring at his own gloomy, melancholic reflection in the darkened screen of his phone, Amane smiled bleakly.

If Chitose and Itsuki saw me like this, they'd slap me right on the back, he thought as he stood up from the sofa and left for the first day of school.

Walking to school after two weeks off felt a bit nostalgic. After arriving, Amane approached the central bulletin board, intending to check the rosters for each class posted there.

Although he had come a little earlier than usual, it was the start of the new semester, so plenty of other students were already there—and surprisingly, one of them was his friend Itsuki, who emerged from the crowd to greet him.

"Yo, what's up, Amane. Looks like you just got here."

"Morning. Is the sky falling or something? I can't believe you got here before I did."

"My dad chased me out of the house," Itsuki replied with a small grin. "He said I should at least be early for the first day." He shrugged, as if there was nothing interesting about it.

Itsuki was at odds with his father, as usual. Since meeting Chitose, he didn't seem inclined to do anything his parents wanted. Itsuki's father stubbornly refused to approve of his relationship with Chitose, and ever since then, the two of them never saw eye to eye. Of course, Itsuki's father could be pretty stern, even before his son had started dating, Amane thought that he was overall an earnest and sensible man—and a decent parent.

That said, Itsuki's current situation really made Amane appreciate his relationship with his own parents. They could be more than a little overbearing at times, but on the

whole, they respected their son's wishes, and Amane almost never argued with them. After all, they had gone to a lot of trouble to send him to school far away from his hometown. And they never gave him a hard time about who he associated with—if anything, they fully supported him on that front.

Amane hadn't told his parents about his feelings toward Mahiru, but they were obviously quite taken with her—even openly mentioning that she'd make a wonderful daughter-in-law. If by some slim chance he did one day happen to find himself in that sort of relationship with Mahiru, Amane was sure his parents would approve.

Amane was well aware that he was blessed with a loving family.

…Considering Mahiru's situation, I've seriously got it made, huh?

Amane fell into an uncomfortable silence as he recalled the chilling expression he'd seen Mahiru's mother brandish, only for Itsuki to flash him a flippant grin. It seemed like he had already regained his usual cheer.

"Well, my dad's not worth worrying about. Come on, let's check out the class lists."

"From the way you're smiling, I can more or less guess what got posted."

Amane shot Itsuki a weary look when he saw his friend's ordinary smile had become a devious grin, then searched for his own name among the crowd of students who were doing the same.

It didn't take him long to spot his name. As he started confirming who his classmates would be for the year, Itsuki's impish smile began to make more sense.

There were many familiar names on the roll sheet.

Several belonged to students who had been in his class last year—namely, Itsuki and the boy who was often referred to as the prince, Yuuta Kadowaki.

Amane also spied Chitose's name, which certainly explained Itsuki's good mood.

And there was one more he recognized.

Mahiru Shiina—the name of his next-door neighbor who always looked after him, the secret object of his affections.

If I didn't know any better, I'd swear somebody planned it all out.

Of course, class assignments were decided by the school administration, meaning Amane and his friends had no say where they ended up, but he never expected to be placed with so many familiar faces.

"We got real lucky, didn't we, Amane?"

"I don't know what's so great about it. I guess it's a relief to have you with me."

"What's up, you getting embarrassed for once?"

"Shut it. And if anyone's lucky, it's gotta be you, right? Being in the same class as Chitose and all."

"I really am, man. I was worried that they'd heartlessly tear us two lovers apart…"

"On second thought, maybe putting some distance between you two would've been better for everybody."

With this excitable couple around, there wouldn't be a single moment of boredom—or peace. And their constant displays of affection were almost guaranteed to bother all the single students.

Amane was happy to be in the same class as his friends Itsuki and Chitose, but on the other hand, he could already tell that this year was going to be turbulent and difficult.

"Why so harsh? Ah, don't tell me—it's because you're single, right?"

"Try saying that to the other guys. If looks could kill, man."

"I'm joking, I'm joking! But seriously, this turned out pretty great, yeah? You finally get to be in the same class as the girl you like."

"…Shut up." Amane turned sharply away from Itsuki's teasing.

A cheerful voice interrupted their banter. "I could be wrong, but Fujimiya looks a little pissed, doesn't he?" There was a quiet laugh. "He'll start to hate you if you tease him too much, Itsuki."

Amane felt himself frown as he looked up and saw Yuuta, the class prince, standing beside Itsuki with one hand resting on his shoulder.

It was impossible to miss the flickering glances gathering on him in the hallway. This level of attention must have been completely normal to him, because he didn't seem bothered in the slightest. Yuuta was just showing Amane a friendly smile.

"Morning. We're in the same class again this year. Looking forward to it."

It didn't seem like a very significant interaction. He had seen Itsuki and Amane conversing by the bulletin board and had come over to greet them. Yuuta got along okay with Itsuki, so that wasn't strange, but it was unusual for him to be so friendly with Amane.

Amane felt a little uncomfortable talking with such a popular guy. There was nothing wrong with Yuuta as a person, but Amane disliked attracting too much attention.

Besides, making new friends like this at the beginning of the new semester threatened to remind him of the past. The pain welling up slowly but steadily from the deep crevices of his chest was nostalgic. It was a feeling he thought he had buried a long time ago.

"…Fujimiya?"

"Eh? Ah, sorry; I spaced out for a second. Hope we have a good year."

Amane smiled back weakly at Yuuta, who was now frowning slightly, looking worried for a moment before finally letting his face soften into a relieved smile.

You should save a smile like that for your fangirls, Amane thought briefly. But Yuuta looked genuinely happy, so Amane was also relieved.

At that point, a couple other boys came over, and Yuuta left to chat with them.

Itsuki, who had been silent until then, had his eyes fixed on Amane, as if he was forming some conjecture. "Is it just me, or are you on your guard around Yuuta?"

"…No, that's not it. It's just… I was thinking how weird it is for him to try to be friends with me."

"Really, dude? You're always way too hard on yourself. Look, it's not like Yuuta has some ulterior motive for being friendly with you, ya know? Not everyone who acts nice is looking to gain some advantage. You're one cagy guy, Amane."

"I'm sure that's true," Amane replied, "but—" The moment he noticed Itsuki glaring at him with exasperation, he gulped back down the words he was going to say next. *—But there are people like that out there.*

Not that he suspected Yuuta was one of them or anything.

They had only spent the past year as classmates in passing, but even so, Amane knew that Yuuta was a good guy. With his kind, honest, charming personality, it was hardly a mystery why the boy was popular, and no wonder he had lots of friends.

Still, this particular time of year brought back many unpleasant memories for Amane, and it made him extra suspicious, even when he knew there was no reason to be.

"It doesn't really have anything to do with what kind of guy Kadowaki is. I'm just shy, so I get spooked when someone suddenly wants to talk to me."

"Well, I guess that's fair. You are the shy type. The first time we talked, you got all wound up like a nervous cat."

"Who're you calling a cat?"

"Tell me I'm wrong. Timid and quiet as could be as long as no one touched you, but the moment someone made contact, *bam*, your hackles would be up."

Amane frowned at Itsuki's analogy. As a cat lover, he didn't appreciate his sulky attitude being lumped in with such adorable, free-spirited creatures.

"Anyway, I think you'd get along with Yuuta if you gave him a chance. Since middle school, we've been in the same class for three years, so I can vouch for him. He's a good dude."

"I can tell that just by watching him, but it's my feelings that are the problem. Besides, I've never really talked with him…"

"I'm pretty sure it won't be long before he changes that himself."

"Wait, why?"

"What do you mean? It's 'cause even Yuuta can tell you're a good guy."

Itsuki said that with another big grin, but Amane frowned reflexively. He simply didn't understand.

"Mooorniiing! Looks like we're in the same class this year!"

After Amane entered his new classroom, found his assigned seat, and checked that there were no mistakes in his school paperwork, Chitose approached him, looking like she'd just gotten out of bed.

This year, both Chitose and Itsuki were in his class, so he knew this was only the first of many boisterous and heartburn-inducing days.

"Good morning. You didn't come with Itsuki today, huh?"

"Yeah, I overslept. Honestly, I totally forgot about the new semester, and my mom had to wake me up. Where's Ikkun?"

"He went to the vending machines a minute ago."

"Gotcha. Guess I'll message him and ask for a milk tea. Ah, Mahirun, Mahirun! We're in the same class this year! I can't wait!"

Waving her hands excitedly, Chitose, who wasn't bashful around anyone, bounded over to Mahiru, who had just entered the classroom. Mahiru, surrounded by a slew of boys and girls, blinked in surprise. Everyone around her stiffened when they heard Chitose address her so casually, but when Mahiru reacted normally and instantly donned her angelic smile, it was clear that Chitose was permitted to talk to her that way. That was when the crowd's mood changed to one of jealousy.

Watching Chitose rush over to Mahiru with so much energy that early in the morning left Amane feeling equal parts frustration and admiration. When his gaze fell on Mahiru, their eyes met for a moment, and he thought he saw a flicker of change in her soft smile. But the next instant, she shifted her gaze back to Chitose with a tender look in her eyes.

“Mahirun, school lets out early today, so let’s go eat crepes on the way home! The crepe place in front of the station is super tasty!”

“That sounds nice. I’d like to go if you really don’t mind.”

It might have been Amane’s imagination, but he thought he saw her glance in his direction again. As far as Amane was concerned, she certainly didn’t need to get his permission every time she wanted to go somewhere, and he had no intention of being a burden who kept her from going out when she wanted. He could always eat fast food or go to a convenience store for lunch. Mahiru was cultivating a budding friendship, and Amane was happy for her.

Chitose was very good at connecting with people like that, so he hoped they would have fun together—and that she would show Mahiru, who didn’t typically hang out with many other people, a good time without wearing her out too much.

Mahiru was probably the one who would benefit most from having Chitose in the same class. She was already smiling happily, despite Chitose’s intensity. Amane felt a smile of his own slide into place.

The first day of the new semester consisted of an opening ceremony, then self-introductions and general announcements in the classroom. Once that was all over, the students were dismissed.

Since school let out before lunchtime, Amane had been planning to eat with Mahiru, but instead, he bought a boxed lunch from the convenience store he had come to rely on less and less frequently. After getting home and devouring his basic meal, he sprawled out lazily on the sofa.

Amane had many acquaintances in his new class, and from what he could tell, most of the other students were on the calm side, so it seemed like he would be able to manage one way or another. It was a huge relief to know so many of his classmates. It would have been depressing to spend a year’s worth of classes without even one friend.

Amane had enough self-awareness to understand he had a gloomy disposition, so he expected it would be quite a hurdle to make new friends and get to know them. He had a hard time trusting people in general.

While idly thinking about what a feat it was to have befriended Itsuki and lauding his past self for his foresight, Amane slowly let his eyes slide shut.

Being in an unfamiliar classroom had been a bit taxing. Coupled with post-meal sleepiness, it meant that Amane drifted off in no time.

For Amane, brushing up against the memories he had sealed away brought a small yet sharp pain, like grazing a hangnail.

Normally, he was able to forget about them and chase them to the depths of his mind by focusing on the many good things in his life.

Since meeting Mahiru, he had barely even thought about them anymore, and when the memories did reappear, they were like bubbles that burst the moment they hit the surface of the water. Those pinpricks only lingered briefly. The recent, sudden increase might have been due to the new school year, or maybe it had been triggered when he learned about Mahiru's past. Or possibly because he'd realized that Itsuki, who had been his first new friend after everything had happened, was also buddies with Yuuta.

"Let's have a great year."

There had been another boy once who had said that and extended a hand to Amane.

At the time, Amane had been more trusting—and less wary of others. He had always been surrounded by good people and never learned to recognize when someone meant to hurt him.

And so he didn't doubt the boy. He didn't doubt any of them.

"—You…from the very start—"

Amane jolted awake, and the words he knew came next faded away.

Through blurry eyes, he could see spring sunlight streaming in through the window, gently illuminating the dark, familiar apartment.

There was no one there except Amane and no sound other than his own breathing, which was rougher than usual.

He let out a heavy sigh as he looked at the clock and noted that about an hour had passed since he'd dozed off. A considerable nap, but Amane still felt completely exhausted, probably because of his bad dreams.

Given how tired his body and mind felt, he could have easily gone to sleep again, but he had suddenly lost any inclination to try and rest.

I should at least wash my face and clear my head.

Hoping that a little fresh water might wash away any lingering dregs of melancholy, Amane headed for the sink.

"…You don't look so good, Amane-kun."

Although he had washed up, the hazy feeling in Amane's chest hadn't cleared up. It had only receded just enough for him to stow it in the depths of his heart and wait to forget about it again. He thought he'd managed to wipe any traces of it from his

expression so he wouldn't arouse Mahiru's suspicions, but she was very perceptive and wouldn't be fooled so easily. She had come by after her outing with Chitose, and when they had settled down after dinner, she studied Amane's face and questioned him.

"…Are you feeling sick?"

"No, nothing like that… Uh, it's just that…I took a nap, but I had kind of a bad dream, I guess."

"Oh, you had a nightmare?" She gave him an inquisitive look.

"Mm, sort of." Amane shook his head. "Not a big deal, really. No need to worry." It was a thin excuse.

Mahiru is sharp. She'll leave it at that if it's clear that's what I want. She's the type to let up if she knows I don't want to talk right now.

Amane didn't want to shut her out completely, but it was still a sore spot for him, so he kept her at a bit of a distance. He knew Mahiru wouldn't press the issue.

Mahiru seemed to have sensed that Amane had no intention of opening up at the moment, and she was simply staring intently at him with focused caramel-colored eyes. She clearly wasn't angry, or sad, or troubled. It made him feel a little awkward, but Mahiru didn't stop staring, as if to say she understood what he was going through.

"What is it?"

"Nothing; just thinking that your hair looks especially soft."

"Huh?"

He had been on his guard, wondering what she was going to say next, so this sudden non sequitur caught him by surprise. He had been anticipating an interrogation of some sort, so the mention of his hair left him struggling to respond.

Mahiru was examining Amane's hair with her usual expression.

"Can I touch it?"

"What is this, all of a sudden…? I mean, you can if you like, but—"

"Oh really? In that case, come here."

Mahiru moved to the edge of the sofa and patted her lap.

Amane responded once more with, "Huh?"

He didn't understand.

"Put your head here so I can reach."

“No, no, no.”

Mahiru stared quietly at Amane, who shook his head sharply at this incredibly unusual development. Amane was extremely confused as to why she had suddenly proposed such a thing. Mahiru, on the other hand, seemed perfectly calm, which only heightened his confusion.

“Is there something wrong with my lap?”

“N-no, that’s not—”

He quickly shook his head when he detected the displeasure in her voice.

The opportunity to rest your head in the lap of the person you like is a rare moment of exceptional good luck.

But whether he should simply go along and accept the favor was a different question entirely. No matter how much physical contact they’d had before, laying his head in her lap was a whole new level of intimacy. There was a good chance he would die of embarrassment. Their hug the other day had been urgent and for the sake of soothing and comforting Mahiru, so he hadn’t felt too self-conscious then, but this was a whole other matter.

“It’s fine; just get over here already.”

“N-no, that’s…”

“Amane-kun.”

“…Fine.”

He had been trying to resist, but his willpower crumbled the moment Mahiru called his name with a smile. Her latent powers of persuasion revealed themselves once again as she invitingly smoothed the fabric of her skirt, wiping out all remaining pockets of resistance.

Thank goodness she’s wearing a long skirt, he thought from the bottom of his heart as he hesitantly went to lie down on the sofa to rest his head in Mahiru’s lap. He had his back to her, looking out over her knees, as he felt the firm softness of her thighs.

Her slim legs, lean but still undeniably feminine, supported the weight of his head perfectly. Her lap was at just the right height, and he could smell her faint, sweet scent and feel the heat of her body. The last of his willpower dissolved as she brought a hand down and gently brushed his cheek.

“What would you do if I did something really rude while I was down here?” he muttered in a brusque voice, making his final attempt to put up a fight.

He heard a quiet laugh.

“I guess I would stand right up and then stomp on you.”

“Sorry I asked.”

Recently, Mahiru had been a bit more reserved, so hearing her tease him after so long was almost nostalgic. Amane apologized right away, in case the threat was serious, but Mahiru was smiling in amusement at Amane’s reaction.

“Well, I know you wouldn’t do anything like that. You don’t seem to have the courage or the energy.”

He had some complicated feelings about being called a coward so casually, but the truth was that he did not, in fact, have the nerve to try anything because he thought Mahiru would hate him if he did, so she wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Well, why don’t you just relax instead? It’ll be easier to reach you if you settle down.”

Amane didn’t have much reason to refuse as she gently ran her white fingers through his black hair, so he kept his mouth shut.

…She must be worried about me.

This was probably Mahiru’s way of cheering him up.

Amane guessed that she realized he was feeling stressed lately and decided to help him decompress. He wasn’t sure why her first thought was that it would be relaxing for him to lie down on her lap like this, but it was actually surprisingly comfortable, so he wasn’t going to complain. And his heart wasn’t pounding as hard as he’d expected, possibly because he was so worn out.

A pleasant drowsiness washed over him. He had no idea it could feel so nice to have someone gently comb their fingers through his hair. It had been a long time since he had been spoiled by someone like this, and he wasn’t sure what, if anything, he should do. He could feel himself sinking gradually into a deep sea of happiness and contentment. It probably wouldn’t be long before he was on the cusp of sleep.

Just as soft slumber was about to completely overtake him, Amane heard Mahiru say, “Well, doesn’t the young gentleman have a single thing to say about what it’s like to lay his head in a young lady’s lap?”

His eyes snapped open as he exhaled sharply.

“Ah, well, see—”

“I heard from Chitose-san that when a boy is tired, if you let him lie down on your lap, it’s like a dream come true and should help him feel better.”

Amane now realized he had Chitose’s meddling to thank for this unusual bit of intimacy. Though, he couldn’t honestly say she’d been completely off the mark. Actually, he really ought to thank her.

Amane pursed his lips as he thought about how he should answer Mahiru’s question. While he ruminated, she kept tapping his cheek with her finger.

Frankly, it was the greatest feeling ever, and he wished he could enjoy it every day. But he was worried if he said that, she would be disgusted or taken aback, so he didn't say anything at all.

He couldn't be completely honest, but on the other hand, he had to say something nice. He was being pampered here, so he couldn't lie and claim it wasn't all that special. However, he could practically envision himself saying something dumb and blunt that would drive her away.

After puzzling over it for a few moments, Amane decided to respond with some mild praise.

"…I think it's really great. But don't take that to mean anything weird."

"How can I when it's the first time I've done it?"

Amane couldn't keep his heart from leaping at the words *first time*. He remembered that she didn't like getting too close to boys and really avoided most physical contact altogether. Of course he would be the first.

When he realized how much Mahiru must trust him to let him get so close, Amane felt his chest and face grow hot. But Mahiru didn't seem to notice and simply kept running her fingers through his hair with an air of satisfaction.

"Well, it's something I wanted to try, so you just sit back and relax. I'm only petting you anyway."

"…I guess."

Mahiru emphasized that she was just doing as she pleased, so he didn't need to hold back or be anxious. Feeling a bit sheepish about it all, Amane decided to take Mahiru up on her offer.

"…Amane-kun, what do you think of our class this year?"

She had played with his hair in silence for a little while before casually posing the question.

"Hmm, well, I never thought we'd end up in the same class."

He'd been hoping to have at least one friend in his class, but it hadn't occurred to him that everyone could end up together.

"Heh-heh. It was fun to see you so stunned."

"Hey… But yeah, it definitely caught me by surprise. I'll have to be vigilant."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll need to keep my distance so I don't speak to you too casually or act overly familiar."

On the one hand, Amane felt relieved that his friends would be nearby, but on the other hand, since Mahiru was there, he would have to be careful about how they

interacted. He would avoid talking to her whenever he could, but if he slipped up and let on that they were close, it would probably become a huge spectacle.

In spite of his feelings, he didn't want to be indiscreet about his relationship with Mahiru at school. As far as Amane was concerned, as long as they could spend time together at home, that was fine by him. He had no desire to go out of his way to make enemies out of most of the boys at school.

As long as people didn't know about their relationship, they wouldn't try to talk to him. He planned on acting like the two of them were strangers. Thinking that surely Mahiru must understand, he let his eyes close—but she pinched his cheek between her fingers.

"…What's wrong?"

"…Oh, nothing. I understand your logic, but I couldn't let it slide without doing anything, so…"

"What's that supposed to mean…?"

She seemed very sulky for some reason, but there was nothing Amane could do. He surmised that she wanted the two of them to talk like they always did, even at school. After all, she could relax around him. But she wasn't the one who'd end up in trouble.

If Amane had been a popular and attractive guy—like Itsuki, for example—then maybe the two of them could hang out whenever and wherever they wanted. But since Amane was not popular or even sociable, it was a different story entirely.

It wasn't hard to imagine that there might be people who would decide that Amane wasn't worthy of the angel's attention and hound him.

Amane was accustomed to being alone. What he didn't need was the ire of his classmates.

"…Well, I'll go along with it…for now," Mahiru said eventually.

"I dunno how I feel about that 'for now'…but it's a start."

"We'll still act normal at home, though, right?"

"Of course… But if we're going to act normal, shouldn't I get out of your lap?"

"This doesn't count."

Mahiru announced this strange exception and brushed Amane's hair again. Or rather, she played with it like she was kneading it. Amane knew that if he said anything more, Mahiru would pout again, and as long as he kept his mouth shut, he could keep savoring this blissful moment. It was an easy decision.

Maybe because she was pleased by Amane's silent and docile reception, Mahiru started arranging his hair more deliberately.

Her movements were gentle and affectionate, as well as a little awkward, but Amane submitted to the comforting sensation, and it wasn't long before he was utterly at her mercy.

...I'm really being spoiled…

If she kept this up, he would without a doubt sink into the deepest of slumbers. He felt his eyes start to drift closed again as he basked in Mahiru's warmth, and another wave of sleepiness washed over him. Truly, there was no defying the lulling power of the angel's lap.

He resisted the urge to roll over toward her and burrow into the inviting warmth and surround himself with her smell. He knew that if he did that, there would be no turning back, so he deliberately kept his back to her, just barely holding his ground.

As Mahiru continued stroking his head affectionately, he began to feel heavy, and after another moment of resistance, he finally surrendered to the irresistible comfort.

"…You look sleepy."

He heard her quiet murmur but no longer had the energy to lift his eyelids.

"It's all right; I'll wake you up in a bit. Go ahead and rest."

As he listened to her soft whispers, Amane could no longer stay awake and quickly yielded to the embrace of the sandman.

When he lifted his heavy eyelids, Amane was looking up at two mountains covered by a blouse, and beyond that, Mahiru's face, wearing a tender expression. He immediately sat up, eyes wide with surprise.

Apparently, he had turned over at some point in his sleep to face the ceiling. Because of that, he had been greeted with a rather bracing view upon waking, and his heart was thumping strangely.

"…How long was I out for?"

At this question, Mahiru let slip a faint smile.

"About an hour. You look so cute when you're sleeping."

"Don't stare at me, geez."

"You're one to talk."

He had attempted to rebuke Mahiru for her teasing, but she immediately turned the tables on him. It was true, he had watched Mahiru sleep several times before—and had gone as far as to touch her face once—so he really didn't have much room to complain.

"I let you see me with my guard down, so I thought it was time to even the score."

"But you fell asleep all on your own…so…mghnhgh…"

"Oh, so you're talking back to me now?"

She gently pinched both his cheeks.

“Showwy…,” Amane meekly apologized, still struggling to talk properly.

“Very well. Good grief.”

Apparently satisfied with Amane’s apology, Mahiru stopped tugging at his cheeks and started poking at them instead. In the end, it didn’t change the fact that she was touching his face, but Amane had also pinched her, so this was his just deserts.

His cheeks were less pliable and stretchy than Mahiru’s, so he didn’t see how pinching them could be all that much fun. Still, Mahiru kept it up with a happy smile, slowly tracing a finger down his cheek.

“You look much better now.”

“Did I really look that worn out earlier?”

“Not exactly. But I see you every day, so I can tell. I mean, you notice whenever I’m having a hard time, right, Amane-kun?”

“Guess that’s true.”

“It’s that sort of thing.”

Mahiru made this declaration with a blank expression, then traced over Amane’s cheek again and smiled impishly.

“Whenever things get tough, I want you to lean on me, okay? Just like you let me lean on you.”

“…I’ll try.”

Suddenly, Mahiru pinched him again, gripping his cheeks between her thumbs and two fingers.

Hoping to save his poor face from further pinch-related damage, he replied in a panic, “F-fine, I understand!”

Mahiru nodded in satisfaction. “Good.”

“…This is coercion, you know.”

“Women can be forceful when we need to be. Besides, I never let anyone other than you see me behave this way, so there’s no problem, really.”

“Uh, there’s plenty of problems.”

If anything, that’s scarier.

Mahiru had also just admitted that she gave Amane special treatment. But she didn’t seem particularly concerned about the implications of what she just said and simply smiled when she saw Amane’s obvious embarrassment.

“You dummy,” Amane muttered, turning away in a weak attempt to hide his chagrin.

Chapter 2

Contact with the Prince

Even though he and Mahiru now had class together, Amane's daily life had hardly changed at all. He diligently attended school like a good student, ate lunch with Itsuki in the cafeteria, and went home afterward because he wasn't in a club. He almost never interacted with Mahiru. Everything was as it should be.

One thing that had changed a little bit was that he'd started talking with Yuuta more than during their first year.

That said, it wasn't Amane's idea. Rather, Yuuta often approached him, and Amane did his best to handle the attention despite his obvious confusion.

The day of the opening ceremony, he had felt for an instant that the events of the past might be repeating, and that had naturally set him on edge. But Yuuta was clearly a different kind of person than his former friend.

Amane was still slightly on guard, but that didn't mean he wanted to awkwardly keep Yuuta at arm's length, and as they spent time together, Amane began to recognize that Yuuta was a cheerful, honest, and compassionate young man. Above all, he had Itsuki's seal of approval, so Amane didn't think he was someone who demanded his suspicion.

After attending his first week of school as a second-year high school student, Amane noticed that the pain he had been harboring for so long began to fade.

"Hey, are you cool with this?"

Sitting across from Amane, Itsuki said that as if he had suddenly remembered to ask.

At the moment, they were having lunch in the cafeteria just like they had done since their first year.

Sometimes Chitose would join them, but today she was off eating with Mahiru. Amane was glad the two of them got along, even in public.

"Cool with what?"

"I mean: keeping things as they are with you know who."

“There’s no need to go out of my way to talk to her at school.”

By which I mean, if I speak to her, everyone around us is going to stare and wonder where I got the nerve.

It wouldn’t do for meek, unfashionable Amane to be seen approaching Mahiru.

“Dude, she’s just itching to talk to you, and it shows.”

“…Yeah, I noticed.”

Mahiru seemed to be doing her best to ignore Amane, but every now and then she would slip up and stare over at him glumly.

So far, she’d only done it when nobody else was looking, but Chitose had taken it upon herself to start giving Amane dirty looks on Mahiru’s behalf, so it was becoming harder and harder to endure.

“You need to transform. There’s no other way.”

“No way; dressing up like that is a huge pain, and you know I don’t like the attention.”

Besides, even if the rumors had settled down for the moment, some people had seen him out and about with Mahiru, even if they hadn’t recognized him. If people made the connection that Amane was the mystery man, things would probably get so hectic it would derail his whole high school career.

“Why are you like this…? And honestly, you could be so popular.”

“That makes no sense.”

Amane couldn’t imagine changing his hair a little bit and suddenly becoming popular, but Itsuki seemed convinced for some reason.

“I think you’ve got the kind of personality that girls want in a boyfriend. You’ve got a cynical side, but you’re also sincere, and you’re the type of guy who treats girls well.”

“…Isn’t that normal?”

“I think there are a lot of guys who can’t even do that much. Like, you’re the type who can figure out what a girl wants and then make it happen. You don’t make a big deal out of it; you just pay attention and then act on what you see.”

“…You sound awfully sure about this.”

“If you weren’t that type of guy, do you really think that a cautious girl who’s always hiding behind a guarded smile would have ever gotten attached to you?”

When he put it that way, Amane couldn’t refute his friend’s theory.

He bit his lip hard as he mulled it over, and Itsuki laughed.

“…Also, can I say one thing?” his friend continued.

“What?”

“If you weren’t into her, you probably wouldn’t treat her as well as you do.”

"Shut up. Is it so bad being nice to someone?"

Itsuki could read him like a book. There was no hiding how he felt. Amane turned away and began sulkily slurping up the noodles he'd ordered for lunch.

Rather than teasing him further, Itsuki nodded sagely and acted impressed.

"If you ask me, you oughtta be happy. It's a wonderful thing to find someone to treasure."

"Oh, you think you're an expert?"

"I know I am."

"…I don't really care whether we get together. If there's someone out there who would make her happy, I don't mind if it's not me."

If Mahiru chose some other, unknown man and was really, truly happy with him, Amane would give them his blessing. If anyone deserved happiness, it was Mahiru. Of course, he very much wanted to be the one to make her happy, but if she ended up finding fulfillment elsewhere, he wouldn't balk at swallowing his feelings.

"…You're such a wuss."

"And you're a jackass… Look, I do want to make her happy, I do, but—"

"Then just tell her that already."

"I can't just come out and say it, you moron!"

How can I confess my feelings if I haven't even figured them out myself?

Mahiru was so cautious when it came to relationships that Amane was sure there was no way she would be willing to go out with someone for fun or just to try things out. It was all or nothing.

And given everything with Mahiru's parents, she's not likely to agree to date so easily anyway.

"…You are a serious late bloomer."

"Shut up. It's fine; I can get her to like me in my own way."

"…Well, as an objective observer, I think it'd be better if you tell her everything straight up, but—"

"But what?"

"…Nothing," Itsuki muttered. "…All right; good luck. I'm rooting for you."

Amane frowned, but he was actually really grateful for his friend's somewhat-exasperated encouragement.

"Oh, Fujimiya, don't see you here often."

Amane had stopped by the local arcade after school. He was just inserting a bill into the change machine when he heard a familiar voice.

He stuffed his change into his wallet and turned around to find Yuuta standing there. He had apparently also come to play games and was standing behind Amane with his wallet in one hand.

"Kadowaki? You're an even rarer sight. What happened to track club?"

"We have a break today. It's not good to work the body too hard day after day."

"Ah."

So the school's top track-and-field star takes a vacation once in a while, too, eh?

Amane stepped back from the machine, and Yuuta inserted his bills and waited for the change. Once he'd deposited about two thousand yen worth of coins back in his wallet, Yuuta noticed Amane staring at him and smiled.

"I'm surprised to find you in a place like this, Fujimiya. You don't seem like you would appreciate the noise much."

"I hit up game centers like everyone else. I just don't like to waste money, so I don't go that often."

"Hmm. Well, what did you come for today?"

"I wanted to check out the crane games. I got an order to pick up a stuffed animal."

Actually, it was more like Chitose had shown him the NEW ARRIVALS page of the game center's website and pointed out which ones Mahiru might like, so he had decided to get one as a present for Mahiru, since she had seemed a little down lately.

Also, as he had seen in the infamous photo Chitose had sent him, Mahiru's apartment was quite sparse. So he was hoping to win a cute friend for the teddy bear he'd already gotten her.

"Do you think you can win a stuffed animal?"

"It's kind of my specialty."

The crane arms at this particular arcade were stronger than usual, so it was easy to pick up the toys. As long as he accounted for the balance and position of the stuffed animals when controlling the crane, it was surprisingly easy to snag a prize.

It was actually his mother who had taught him how, way back in elementary school. *"This one, you see? If you bring the arm down right here, you can get it no problem. And this one is good, too. Just hook the tag with the arm."* It was one of many pointless talents that had rubbed off on him.

Yuuta was giving him an incredulous look, so Amane led his classmate over to the corner crammed with all the crane games. He decided to try his luck on a machine in the new-arrivals section filled with stuffed rabbits.

Amane casually put a coin in the slot. Judging by the placement of the stuffed animals and the size of the crane arm, a single coin would be enough. Some prizes took a

lot of money to win, but one of these stuffed rabbits—a character Amane didn't recognize—should be easy.

He aimed the crane at the place where the rabbit's head and body met and skillfully guided the arm into place, catching the head and avoiding the body. As the crane came back up, it brought the prize with it, secured by the head. When he took his hand off the lever, the stuffed rabbit tumbled down the prize shoot with a plop.

Amane casually pulled it out and turned to show Yuuta, who looked impressed.

"Wow!"

"The crane arms at this game center are strong, and the staff are friendly, so if you get stuck, they'll show you how to win. It's a good place for beginners, too."

"So that's why Itsuki and the others said this place would be good? I see now." Yuuta nodded. "By the way, is that a gift for someone in particular?"

"Yeah. Someone who takes good care of me. I want to show my appreciation."

Well, it's not a lie.

I just conveniently left out the fact that I'm talking about Mahiru. It's true she takes care of me, and I am grateful for what she does every day.

He also quite simply thought Mahiru would look adorable surrounded by stuffed animals, so his choice of gift was not entirely innocent.

"You're a really thoughtful guy, Fujimiya. But I knew that already."

"What do you mean, you knew that?"

"Well, you're sensitive, and you always act like a gentleman. Plus, you help people out without making a big deal of it."

"Sometimes, I guess."

"Even if it's only sometimes, you helped me. Like with the bags and stuff, that was a big help." Yuuta thanked him again with a bright smile, and Amane felt slightly embarrassed.

It really wasn't a big deal, but apparently Yuuta still remembered it.

Amane usually had shopping bags on hand anyway, and it hadn't been his intention to make Yuuta feel indebted to him.

"…Oh yeah, did you eat all that Valentine's chocolate, Kadowaki?" Amane asked, trying to move past the awkwardness he felt when confronted with Yuuta's overflowing gratitude.

Yuuta's expression grew cloudy. "Ah… Can you keep a secret? I only ate the store-bought ones."

"You didn't eat the handmade ones?"

"…The handmade chocolates are… How do I put this? I'm sure there are some girls who can make them well, but—"

“They’re bad?”

“No, it’s just… Sometimes they have hairs in them or other things that clearly shouldn’t be in there.”

“Are we still talking about chocolate…?”

Finding out that something like that had accidentally gotten mixed in would have been bad enough, but from hearing his voice, Amane suspected that Yuuta had discovered intentional adulterations on more than one occasion.

He remembered reading somewhere that, long ago, people had believed mixing a part of the body into someone’s food could work like a magic charm to make them fall in love. The person who consumed the secret ingredient was supposed to be helpless to resist the effects.

“I accept the gifts, even if they’ve got…stuff in them, but…that used to happen a lot, and I’m still afraid it might happen again, so I tell everyone ahead of time that I won’t eat any handmade chocolates. The ones who give them to me anyway… Well, I appreciate the thought behind the present, and I do still pay back every gift. Unfortunately, some of them try to disguise it as store-bought chocolate, but… What can you do? And of course, if it happens more than once, I never accept chocolate from that girl again, so…” Yuuta trailed off, looking sad and lost. Amane couldn’t help but feel bad for him.

“…I guess even popular guys have it rough.”

“Meanwhile, everybody is so jealous of me, I feel like I can’t complain, but… It’s not like I want to be popular. Honestly, it’s miserable. I’d give it all up if I could.”

“Sounds serious.” Amane nodded.

“I mean, yeah, it’s disturbing. Girls give me sweets or food with weird stuff hidden in it, smiling the whole time.”

It was only reasonable to be apprehensive.

Ordinarily, most boys would treasure a girl’s handmade food, but for Yuuta it was a potential threat. Going through something so awful so many times must have been terrible.

“Sometimes I think it would be easier if I went out with someone, so the other girls would stop flirting with me…but I’m afraid whoever I picked would end up getting bullied.”

“…Jealousy’s a scary thing.”

“Yeah…”

Yuuta’s shoulders slumped like he was at a complete loss. He seemed exhausted.

Amane won a large bag of potato sticks from a nearby machine and offered them to the sad boy in front of him.

“Eat these; you’ll feel better,” he said. “And you know, if you ever want to talk or something, you can come to Itsuki or me.”

“It’s just hard sometimes… So I appreciate it.”

Seeing Yuuta so troubled, it occurred to Amane that popularity didn’t always make people’s lives easier or better.

When Amane got home, Mahiru heard him entering and came to the door to greet him.

She was wearing her apron and had her hair up in a bun. She always tied it back when she was cooking, but this time she had added a braid as a cute flourish that accentuated her practical style.

Mahiru smiled, a little relieved now that Amane had returned. Apparently, she had already finished making dinner.

After leaving the arcade, Amane had gone to a café with Yuuta to listen to him complain over coffee. He had let Mahiru know he would be late, but evidently she had still worried.

“Welcome home, Amane-kun… What’s in the bag?”

“I stopped by the arcade and got some prizes.”

The huge bag was crammed full of all the things he’d won, including the stuffed rabbit. It was obvious just by looking that there was a lot inside.

“…That’s quite the haul.”

“And I only used about two days’ worth of lunch money.”

“Wow, what did you win?”

“Maybe we can save that for later? I’m starving.”

Amane wanted to find the right moment to present her with the rabbit. Her surprise would be worth the wait.

Besides, his stomach was growling. He wasn’t lying when he said he wanted to enjoy some of Mahiru’s delicious cooking.

“In that case, go change and wash your hands—and don’t forget to gargle. While you do, I’ll set the table.”

“Roger, roger.”

He didn’t really need the reminders, but it still made him happy to hear her concern for him. She was maybe even acting a little maternal, but he didn’t say that out loud and instead headed to the bathroom as instructed.

“…So what did you bring back that needed such a large bag?”

The prizes must have been on Mahiru’s mind. After dinner, she glanced over at the bag sitting beside the sofa and asked about it again.

“Hmm? Stuffed animals.”

Amane had no intention of hiding it, so he picked up the bag and set it on his lap, then peeled off the tape keeping it closed.

“Stuffed animals?”

“You like them, right, Mahiru?”

“Y-yeah, I do, but—”

“I saw a few I thought you might like, so I got them for you. Here.”

The best prize among the day’s winnings had to be the stuffed bunny that was about the same size as the bear he had given her before. It was pretty large, and he had won it with only a single coin, so he decided it was all right to feel a little proud.

He pulled out the bunny and set it on Mahiru’s knee, where she could get a good view of its white fur and big round eyes.

He didn’t really know anything about the particular mascot. He had simply picked it out because a bunny seemed like something Mahiru would like.

She stared at the stuffed rabbit sitting on her knee.

“You…don’t like rabbits?”

“…It’s cute.”

“I’m glad.”

Mahiru wrapped both arms around the stuffed rabbit and squeezed it tight against her cheek, just like she always did with her favorite cushion. For a second, Amane thought about getting out his phone for a picture but ultimately decided against it.

She was smiling softly, so he captured the scene with his mental camera and pulled another stuffed animal from the densely packed bag.

“There’s more. I’ve got cats and dogs and—”

Thanks to the crane arms at that game center being relatively strong, Amane had been able to get most of the prizes for very little money, so he had picked up toy after toy, grabbing any and all he thought Mahiru would like.

As he added a beige-and-white stuffed cat that looked sort of like Mahiru’s style and a plush Shiba Inu dog, she looked at him with bewilderment.

“Uh, um, this many…?”

“I… Uh, I hope they won’t be in the way…”

“No, not at all! I don’t have any decorations in my apartment, and they’re very cute. I’m happy.”

“That’s great.”

As he had imagined, Mahiru looked adorable surrounded by a small herd of stuffed animals.

She was still hugging the bunny, but she looked back and forth restlessly between the cat and dog, wondering which to hug next. Amane couldn't help but smile, and Mahiru must have noticed him watching her, because her face turned bright red, and she tried to hide behind the stuffed rabbit.

The contrast between the rabbit's white fur and her blushing cheeks was striking.

Mahiru's eyes, peeking out from the gap between the bunny's ears, were a bit teary, which only made her more adorable. Finally, overcome by embarrassment, she leaned over and buried her face in Amane's shoulder.

"…Don't grin at me like that."

"I wasn't."

"You were! You were smiling. Laughing at me for being childish."

"That's not why I was smiling. It's because you're cute."

"…So you were smiling after all, weren't you?"

"You got me," he said teasingly, flashing her another big grin. This time, Mahiru slapped his thigh, so he rubbed her head in an attempt to pacify her for the time being.

Mahiru seemed to settle down, and when he grinned at her again, he did his best to make sure she didn't notice.

"…I feel like this is all a trick or something."

"It's only your imagination."

"…Well, just for today, I'll play along," Mahiru muttered disapprovingly. Amane decided not to point out that she was still smiling.

Looking at the cat that was in Mahiru's lap and the bunny she was holding, he thought she reminded him a little of both of those animals as he continued stroking her hair.

Mahiru suddenly sat up. Her cheeks were still flushed, but Amane could see a new tinge of protest in her eyes.

"…I'm always on the receiving end."

Apparently, all the gifts were making her uncomfortable.

"I'm just doing what I want to do, so don't worry about it."

"But…I'm always getting things from you. You give me presents, and you're so thoughtful, and you spend so much time with me… Everything."

"But those are all things I want to give you, so there's nothing for you to worry about."

It's not like I'm expecting to be paid back or anything. It's just because I want to make her happy. Maybe that makes it sound like her happiness is my compensation or something, but the truth is it's all for my own satisfaction. It feels good to make her happy, so I do. That's all there is to it.

But apparently Mahiru felt guilty. That seemed absurd to Amane, considering all the trouble she went to for his sake, plus all the care and attention she always gave him. He honestly didn't think he was anywhere close to balancing the scales.

But it seemed Mahiru felt the opposite.

"I want to give something back," she insisted.

"You're so stubborn…," he teased. "But…I guess if you feel that strongly, there is maybe one thing I'd like."

"If it's something I can give, name it."

She really seemed like she was ready to do whatever he asked. Of course, he wasn't going to put her on the spot with anything crazy. But he had to make a request of some kind, or Mahiru would feel even worse.

"I want a pudding."

And so Amane gladly asked for something he knew Mahiru could handle.

"…A pudding?"

"One with plenty of eggs. I want to eat your homemade version."

"…You don't mean one from the store, right? That's not nearly enough to pay you back."

"Of course not. I'll only be satisfied if you make it yourself."

Amane didn't care for most sweets, but pudding was a different matter.

He liked cream puffs that were made with only pudding or custard-cream filling and knew that if Mahiru made the pudding by hand, it was sure to be delicious. A sweet treat skillfully handcrafted by a girl he liked… He couldn't think of anything better.

He made his request very seriously, and Mahiru stared up at him silently for a moment, then nodded sharply.

"…All right, I'll make some this weekend. A stiff pudding with lots of egg, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

"I'll do my best to make something tasty!"

"Okay, okay, you don't have to get so worked up…"

"If I'm doing it, I'm going to do it right."

"Is that how it is?"

Mahiru seemed to be taking this very seriously for some reason. Amane thought that maybe she didn't need to try so hard, but since he was going to get a delicious pudding out of it, he couldn't complain.

He stroked her head once more to show his support, and Mahiru looked slightly bashful and buried the lower part of her face in the back of the bunny's head.

Soft puddings with an abundance of heavy cream were delicious, of course, but for Amane, the best pudding was a stiff one with plenty of egg, the kind that held its shape even in the spoon.

The pudding that Mahiru made clearly highlighted the taste of the egg yolks while carefully balancing the richness of the heavy cream. It had a clean, distinct flavor, and the touch of the caramel's burnt-sugar bitterness kept the whole thing from being too sweet.

Amane found himself bringing spoonful after spoonful to his mouth as if in a trance. Before he knew it, Mahiru's pudding had completely disappeared from his dish.

"Man, that was insanely good."

"I'm really flattered to hear that."

She had brought out the pudding after dinner, and Amane had made short work of it. One serving hadn't been enough, so he'd asked for seconds.

For a high school boy, Amane didn't have that big of an appetite, but when it came to Mahiru's homemade desserts, he was not surprised to find that he always had room.

Feeling even more satisfied than expected for how much he ate, Amane felt utterly content. He rubbed his bulging belly.

"You really can make anything, huh?"

"Well, I had a very…demanding education," Mahiru replied. She was not boasting in the slightest, but it was true that her culinary repertoire was impressive. Sometimes she even made dishes Amane had never seen before. They were always good, and he couldn't get enough of her cooking. Having someone like Mahiru around to make him delicious food was one of Amane's greatest joys.

"Well, I don't know what else to say, except thank you. I'm very happy."

"…Happy?"

"Sure. I mean, who could be unsatisfied with life when they get to eat tasty stuff like this day after day? I always look forward to it."

Mahiru's cooking was pretty much what he looked forward to the most every day. As long as he got to enjoy a meal with her at the end of the day, he could forget all his woes and troubles.

Just the very fact that she was cooking for him all the time was cause for joy, and he was flooded with feelings of happiness every time he took a bite, but Mahiru didn't really seem to understand the value of her own dishes.

Once before, Amane had said that Mahiru's cooking tasted like happiness, but Mahiru didn't seem to understand. If Amane didn't heap high praise on her, she might never recognize its value.

Besides, it was good manners to compliment the cook when their dishes were phenomenal, and he intended to follow through on that.

"…Y-you really think so?"

Mahiru's cheeks flushed slightly at his praise, and she shrunk into herself a little.

"…It makes me happy when you say things like that, Amane-kun."

"Well, if you don't mind that they're coming from me, I'll give you as many compliments as you like. Maybe you want me to be more specific, instead of just saying that everything is good? I can do that, no problem."

Rifts between couples often start with forgetting to thank each other, after all.

Not that he and Mahiru were a couple or anything. But she made dinner for him on an almost daily basis, and he believed it was important to express his gratitude often. And besides, getting good feedback probably made her feel more motivated, so if she wanted, he was prepared to present detailed notes.

But Mahiru shook her head, directly rejecting that idea.

"P-please don't… I'd die if you did."

"That's a little extreme, isn't it?"

"I'm being serious. What you do now is already perfect."

"Really? But you're going to keep making food for me, so I want to show you my appreciation properly. Thank you for everything."

Honestly, these days, Amane's diet entirely depended on Mahiru's cooking, so he felt like he owed her a lot and wanted to do what he could for her. She was so very important to him. When Mahiru wasn't around, Amane quickly fell back into his old hopeless habits, so he hoped she would stay by his side for a long time.

He smiled gratefully, and Mahiru trembled like a phone on vibrate, then quickly stood up.

"…Stupid Amane-kun…" she said in a cute voice. Then she carried the dishes over to the sink. Amane followed, his own dishes in hand.

She had moved suddenly, so Amane wanted to get her attention to tell her he'd handle the cleanup and that she didn't have to do anything else. The moment he lightly caught hold of Mahiru's arm, she whirled around to face him.

She looked at him with a face much redder than it had been before. She seemed like she really couldn't stand being there a second longer.

"…I…I'll do the cleanup. You can go hang out on the sofa. Okay?"

He ruffled her hair once and chased her from the kitchen. Groaning softly, Mahiru rushed for the couch and sank into the cushions. Amane was caught off guard by her sudden lack of composure.

As he washed the dishes, Amane couldn’t get her bashful expression out of his mind. He switched the tap to cold water, hoping to cool his head off a little.

Chapter 3

The Angel and an Unwanted Imposition

Their classmates often called Mahiru an angel. Based on how gentle and modest she was, her kind personality, the fact that she was accomplished in both academics and sports, plus her unparalleled beauty, *angel* did seem like the appropriate nickname for her. It was no surprise then that she was very popular.

During her first year of high school, many boys in many classes had confessed their love for her, and she said that turning them all down was not a point of pride for her, but an annoyance. She did not appreciate strangers approaching her for dates.

So as popular as Mahiru was, after about half a year of stubbornly refusing every suitor, she had finally dissuaded the student body. By the time she met Amane, though many boys were undoubtedly still interested in her, the spate of romantic confessions had more or less abated.

But that also meant they had not ceased entirely, as Amane came to realize.

"Please go out with me."

It happened after school, when Mahiru had stopped by the library to return a book before heading home.

The library room wasn't in building one, where their classroom was, but in building two, meaning she had to walk through a connecting corridor to get there.

Building two was basically full of classrooms, and it was deserted after school let out, save for the occasional student heading for a club meeting. Accordingly, there was very little pedestrian traffic, and it was quiet, so the boy's request was perfectly audible.

When Amane heard the voice coming from below him as he walked down the connecting corridor on the second floor, he tried to step lightly. He wasn't one to stick his nose in strangers' love affairs. Those were private matters, and he didn't have much interest in other peoples' romances anyway. So not wanting to eavesdrop, Amane tried to briskly move along without making any noise.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to turn you down."

However, after hearing a very familiar voice, his body immediately went rigid despite his best intentions. It was a gentle, soft voice that was usually very pleasant. But it had an unmistakable edge to it now.

Even though he knew he shouldn't, Amane crept to a nearby window and peeked over the lip. There on the first floor were Mahiru and a male student who might have been a classmate. Luckily, neither of them seemed to have noticed him.

The boy had his back to Amane, so his expression wasn't visible, but Mahiru was looking at her suitor calmly.

The graceful face of the class's angel was contorted into a somewhat apologetic expression, showing she had no intention of accepting his offer.

"Why—?"

"I don't know you. I'm very sorry, but I cannot return your feelings."

"We can get to know each other once we're going out—"

"I think that dating is something people should do after they've already built a relationship of mutual trust and affection. I'm not interested in going out with someone on a whim—a shallow relationship like that would only do a disservice to everyone involved."

Mahiru had never appreciated shows of affection from boys, especially boys she didn't really know. And considering her home environment, the thought of dating a stranger probably made her very uncomfortable. So she was obviously not going to easily agree to go out with anybody who bothered to ask her.

Mahiru's voice was gentle, but her refusal was firm. There was nothing more to discuss, so she nodded once and turned to leave, but…the would-be suitor grabbed her hand.

Mahiru's lovely voice came out in a small cry of distress. She turned around, frowning nervously. "Excuse me. This is not okay." It seemed like she found his grip on her hand painful.

"Sorry, but I can't just give up."

"I am not going to go out with you. Now please, let me go."

Though she spoke more forcefully this time, and with an undeniably disapproving expression, Mahiru nevertheless maintained her angelic composure to the very end.

Still, the boy pressed her once more as he continued tugging on her hand. Now Mahiru looked frightened, afraid of what the boy might do next.

Amane decided he couldn't let this go on any longer. He frowned and leaned out the half-open window. "I don't think she appreciates you being so forward," he grumbled, loudly enough for the two of them to hear.

The boy spun around frantically, and Mahiru took advantage of the distraction to slip out of his grasp and quickly put some distance between the two of them. She must have recognized Amane's voice, because she looked relieved at the sudden intrusion. Though she had mostly maintained an impassive expression, Amane could tell that Mahiru was disgusted and frightened by the boy's selfish actions.

This must really bother her…

Amane glared at her boorish suitor with a mixture of anger and disgust.

Understandably, the other boy's expression stiffened, which Amane took as a sign of a guilty conscience.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but…I just happened to be passing through and saw you two were having some kind of trouble; that's all. Plus, it sounded like Shiina was in pain." Amane gestured to Mahiru, who was rubbing her hand where the boy had grabbed her.

"A-are you really hurt?" the boy asked, looking even more unwell.

"…You were awfully rough when you grabbed me. And anyway, it's wrong to touch a girl without her permission." Mahiru had regained her composure. Rather than just angry, her voice was icy cold.

"So she says." Amane nodded. "You should watch it."

The male student bit his lip hard. "Sorry" was all he said before hurrying away.

Relieved that the other boy had finally run off, Amane turned toward Mahiru. She smiled at him faintly, still defensively clutching her hand to her chest. Seeing that made his heart ache, and he almost wanted to reach out to her. But they were still in school, so Amane couldn't carelessly make contact.

Mahiru must have understood that. She bowed sharply and turned to walk away. Somehow, she looked even more delicate than usual, but all Amane could do was anxiously watch her go.

"Thanks for earlier."

That was the first thing Mahiru said to Amane once they'd gotten home. She was wearing a troubled smile.

Mahiru must have been thinking about the incident, too. She sat down on the sofa next to Amane, looking a little tired, and leaned back on the cushions. Normally, Mahiru sat up very straight and proper. She must have been feeling a bit worn out.

"Honestly, I was wondering whether I might have overstepped," Amane confessed.

“No, you saved me. He wouldn’t let go, even when I asked him to. Everyone knows I’ve never accepted a love confession, and most guys seem to understand when I turn them down, so they give up very quickly—but he was different.”

Amane didn’t know how many dozens of boys had told her they loved her, but it sounded like a considerable number. Nonetheless, Mahiru had never accepted a proposal. It occurred to Amane that if she ever did start dating someone, their time together would definitely come to an end.

“…You really are popular, huh?”

“Well, I suppose I am. Though it’s not something that makes me happy.” Typical of Mahiru to openly acknowledge it as fact and then clearly express her true feelings on the matter. “I appreciate that they feel affection toward me, but the sheer number of times this has happened is alarming…”

Mahiru muttered something else in a somewhat apologetic tone about not knowing how to manage all those expectations, and Amane realized she must have to deal with this kind of thing a lot.

Amane didn’t interact much with Mahiru in school. Whenever he thought about her, he inevitably looked at her, so he was deliberately trying to limit those incidents whenever possible. That was partly why he had no idea how often she had to field these romantic appeals.

“And I’m sure you always graciously and candidly decline, eh?”

“Well, if someone comes to me to earnestly express their feelings, of course I’m going to hear them out before I turn them away. It would be rude just to ignore them, after all. Though I don’t think all of them are equally serious about their feelings, you know?”

“Oh yeah?”

“Absolutely. There are some boys who confess their feelings knowing that I’ll turn them down, like it’s all some kind of twisted game. Others just like the way I look and want me for a trophy. I have no intention of entertaining something so superficial, of course.”

“I’m surprised there are guys who can muster up the will to confess with such flimsy reasons.”

He had serious doubts about the first group of guys, and when it came to the second group, well, Amane had always believed that a relationship had to be a serious thing. If someone was going to confess their love, they ought to really mean it, and he wasn’t even sure he considered such superficial feelings “love” at all.

“Well, I politely send those guys away, just like all the others. I can’t accept any of their proposals on a fundamental level. It’s just not possible.” Mahiru’s voice had turned cold again.

Amane recalled her reaction the first time she had come into his apartment—and he had accidentally touched on a sensitive subject—and felt he couldn’t say anything further.

Mahiru was obviously not interested in pursuing frivolous relationships. Amane was the same way, and he reflected once more on the fact that while his words back then had been due to a misunderstanding, it was still very rude.

Looking over at Mahiru, he could see that her eyes weren’t as cold as they had been before, and even though he knew that her aggravated, scornful look wasn’t meant for him, he still shrank back a little.

“Anyway, it might be a naive question, but…do people think I’m such a simple person that I would agree to go out with someone I barely know?”

“No, I don’t think that’s quite it…”

“Well then, why all the hopeless attempts? It’s so strange that they think I might say yes even though I don’t know them. It’s just scary being approached by strangers all the time,” Mahiru muttered, clearly troubled by getting so many confessions.

“…Do you think they lose control of themselves because they want you to notice them or something?”

“So you’re saying it’s okay for them to grab me or get rough because they can’t control themselves?” Her mood seemed to be getting even worse.

Amane shook his head sharply to dispel any misunderstanding that Mahiru might be having about what he said. “No, of course not. There’s nothing wrong with having feelings for someone, but it’s not right to push them on anyone else or selfishly try to force their hand. I’m definitely not trying to defend what that guy did. If anything, I’m angry about it.”

Mahiru was very beautiful, and Amane couldn’t blame someone for wanting to win her affection. After all, he had feelings for her himself. But he would never try to force his feelings on Mahiru. The moment he used them to justify making her uncomfortable would be the moment he’d gone too far.

This time, at least, Amane had happened to be there to step in. He shuddered to think about someone grabbing her like that when he wasn’t around. While he knew that Mahiru would not hesitate to defend herself, physically if necessary, it was still an unpleasant thought.

“…Is that so?” Mahiru asked.

“One hundred percent.” Amane replied. “It was awful of him to try to force himself on you like that… Weren’t you scared?”

“I was a little scared, but if he had tried to hurt me at all, I was going to kick him right in the crotch with all my strength.”

Just as he suspected, Mahiru would not have hesitated to retaliate with force. If she was being threatened, anyone would understand it if she defended herself.

“I think that would have taken care of it,” Amane said. “Gotta admit, just thinking about it makes me a little nervous.”

“Not that I would do anything like that to you, Amane-kun.”

“Well, I hope I never give you any reason to.”

His parents would disown him if he ever tried something like that. And it was against his own principles to begin with. Forcing oneself on a girl would be a disgrace to all men.

Amane thought he had made his position on the matter clear, but Mahiru was intently watching him with a hint of exasperation.

“…Of course you wouldn’t. Not Amane-kun, the perfect gentleman.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re angry at me?”

“Oh, no, I’m just complimenting you.”

“The look in your eyes doesn’t seem very approving.”

“Why, you must be imagining things.”

Both her tone of voice and the look in her eyes were far from amicable. Rather, she seemed dissatisfied. What she was saying and the way she was saying it didn’t match, and Amane couldn’t figure out what she really meant. His eyes darted nervously around the room as he squirmed under her gaze. Mahiru smiled slightly, as if to say that his discomfort was unavoidable.

“Well, when it comes to respecting a girl’s space, you’re perfect, Amane-kun, but you do have one weakness, you know?”

“And what might that be…?”

“A weakness to me, am I right?”

Startled by her sudden impish smile, Amane averted his eyes, but Mahiru didn’t seem to notice his discomfort and leaned against him a little bit.

She didn’t seem to notice his heart threatening to leap out of his chest, either.

“It might sound a bit presumptuous, but popularity really is its own problem, you know?” Mahiru muttered in a hoarse voice. She sounded truly troubled. “I’m aware that, physically at least, I’m more attractive than most people. So things like this happen a lot, and I’m tired of it.”

“…Sounds tough.”

“It is. Oh, I’m sure there are some girls who might say it would be a wonderful problem to have, but honestly, I wish I didn’t have to deal with strangers constantly confessing their love to me and then getting moody when I turn them down, or even worse, latching on to me or flying into a rage. Even at the best of times, it gets exhausting having to reject so many advances. And I feel guilty when I turn them down, too, you know.”

Mahiru had no mercy for anyone she decided was her enemy. At the same time, she was fundamentally a virtuous and sensible girl and generally treated everyone she met kindly.

“I don’t think it’s any joking matter to be in danger just by being myself,” Mahiru muttered. “It’s not like I worked so hard to improve myself simply to be somebody’s accessory.”

Mahiru sighed audibly. She sounded truly fed up and exhausted. Popularity certainly came with its own set of hardships.

Amane reached out and gently stroked her hair. Mahiru let him do it, passively accepting the reassuring gesture.

This completely different response to physical contact lay in the relationship of mutual trust between Mahiru and him. As he patted her on the head, taking care not to entangle his fingers in her fine hair, Mahiru closed her eyes, seemingly enjoying the moment. She almost resembled a cat who was letting a trusted companion fawn over her.

“The persona I use at school is one that I chose, but it makes things difficult when people want to get to know me. I won’t let anyone touch me unless I want them to.”

As a slightly—no, quite—displeased-looking Mahiru uttered those words, Amane’s hand hesitated. Right now she was letting him touch her, but he couldn’t help but wonder if he was somehow taking advantage of her being upset.

“Why did you stop?”

“Well, I, uh…,” Amane stammered. “I suddenly feel a little self-conscious about all those times I touched you before…”

“If I didn’t like it, I would have stopped you the first time, so you can relax.”

“G-gotcha.”

“You can touch me even more…if you want.”

She peered up at Amane and smiled gently, and in her eyes he could see trust and a glimmer of anticipation.

Amane gulped. “Th-that’s, um—” He didn’t know how to reply.

“I’m just joking.” Mahiru’s expression returned to normal, and she giggled. Her gaze dropped. “But please…keep holding my hand. What happened today was a little unnerving.”

Amane wasn't sure how to respond to her quiet words or to the heart-wrenching distress he could sense welling up inside her, so he just bit his lip and took her hand.

Mahiru's fingers were elegant and dainty. As he traced his fingers over hers, he could feel that they were soft but strong, with a slight callus where her pen usually rested. They were not weak in the slightest.

But he also didn't think they were strong enough to fight off a high school boy. Amane wasn't sure whether she hadn't been trying to shake him off or wasn't able to. Either way, she had obviously been rattled by what happened.

Amane gently rubbed and massaged her hand, trying to help relax the fear that was coiled up inside her.

Mahiru smiled, looking a bit better. "It's strange, you know. When you touch me, all I feel is comfort."

"Part of me wishes you'd retained a bit of that caution you had when we first…"

He looked into Mahiru's eyes, asking silently if it was really all right to let him touch her like this, and she answered with a beautiful smile.

"Oh, you're not satisfied with our current relationship?"

"It's n-not that I'm not satisfied, but… How do I put this…?"

"If I wasn't all right with it, I wouldn't be hanging around inside your apartment in the first place, and I wouldn't be letting you touch me. I also never would have allowed you to rest in my lap."

"You probably shouldn't have let me do that…"

"Even though you thoroughly enjoyed yourself?"

It was hard for Amane to argue that particular point.

He had happily laid his head down on Mahiru's thighs and fallen into a deep sleep, so his insistence that they not do it again rang a bit hollow. Even if Mahiru had been the one to propose it, he'd eagerly gone along with the idea in the end.

And so when Amane replied by averting his eyes somewhat and saying "…That was that, and this is this," he received an amused laugh.

"Ha-ha! Very convenient. I'll have to remember to use that one later. But please…relax, all right? I'll let you lay your head in my lap anytime you're tired."

"Ah, I think I'll refrain…"

Amane knew if he let himself get accustomed to such a wonderful experience, he'd never be able to go back to being on his own. He'd become utterly hopeless, even more than he already was, but with somehow even less ability to resist her.

When Amane gently declined her offer in the interest of preserving what little dignity he had left, Mahiru smiled pleasantly. "Oh, that's too bad." She didn't seem particularly disappointed. Amane figured she must have been making fun of him.

"…Don't tease me."

"I'm not. That's how I really feel."

In that case, she's just being mean.

Amane tried squeezing her hand harder to let her know how he felt, but Mahiru just laughed like he was tickling her, and he had to quickly turn away to hide his obvious embarrassment.

Chapter 4

The Angel's Decision

"Itsuki! Fujimiya! Let's eat together!"

It was lunchtime at school, and Amane was on his way to get lunch with Itsuki as usual, when a voice he had recently gotten used to hearing called out to him.

As expected, it was Yuuta Kadowaki, one hand waving in the air, exuding his bright and amiable smile as always. Normally, Yuuta ate lunch with other friends, but apparently today was different, as he approached them, wallet in hand.

Yuuta had been speaking to them more frequently since they started their second year, but they still weren't especially close or anything.

But thanks to Amane listening to Yuuta's troubles the other day, an affinity had grown between them, and more importantly, Amane had realized that Yuuta was actually a pretty nice guy. In fact, he kind of reminded Amane of Itsuki.

"It's fine with me…," Amane said.

"Well, you don't mind, do you, Itsuki?"

"Why do you assume I won't mind? I mean, I won't, but…"

"Then it's all good, right?"

"Yeah, it's cool. Like, this guy here might have been sorta suspicious of you for no good reason, but he warmed up to you pretty quick. And looks like you've gotten pretty attached to Amane, too, Yuuta."

"Attached…?" Amane muttered. "He's not a dog."

"But Yuuta is kinda like a dog. He's the type where, once you win his trust, he'll always stay close by, wagging his tail off. He's like… What's the breed…? Like a golden retriever."

"You guys shouldn't call people dogs right to their faces," Yuuta scolded.

But sure enough, once Amane pictured him as a golden retriever, he couldn't help but laugh.

Yuuta noticed Amane's shoulders shaking with mirth and made a sour face, but Amane could tell that the teasing didn't really bother him.

"Don't laugh, Fujimiya."

“Ha-ha, sorry.”

“Amane was thinking the same thing, I knew it.”

“I mean, it *was* a pretty accurate description…”

“Oh come on, not you too, Fujimiya. Look here, I only wanted to be your friend because I thought you were a decent guy, you know?”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing Amane is finally getting a little recognition,” Itsuki said. “Anyway, c’mon, have a seat.”

“Geez, who do you think you are?” Amane retorted, slapping Itsuki playfully.

Kadowaki obediently sauntered over, and when he made eye contact with Amane, he broke into a beaming smile. If he had pointed that smile at any girl, she would have been out cold.

Amane smiled wryly back. “…Can I ask you something?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“Do you really want to be my friend?” Amane inquired. “I mean, I can’t really imagine what you’d get out of it, you know?” He hadn’t intended to say such a thing, but it slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Yuuta was almost certainly trying to be Amane’s friend because he liked him, but Amane’s memories of what had happened in the past might have been clouding his perception.

Yuuta looked puzzled by Amane’s question. “You don’t hang out with your friends because of what you could gain or lose, do you?”

“I guess not, but—”

“Well then, there’s your answer. I’m talking to you because I want to get to know you.”

Yuuta’s smile was like a bright sunny day. Amane squinted at how dazzling it was.

“…Okay,” he eventually agreed.

“Yeah, great, I’m glad you’re getting along,” Itsuki interjected, supplying his thoughts on the matter with a cheeky grin. Then his gaze quickly shifted to another part of the classroom.

He was looking at Chitose, who was clinging to Mahiru with a smile, exclaiming, “You’re so sweet and cute, Mahirun, geez!”

Chitose had always been a touchy-feely person, and she didn’t seem to care that they were in class. Everyone was staring, either because they enjoyed seeing two beautiful girls bonding over some skinship or maybe because they were jealous.

To Amane, it looked like the girls were acting as they always did, but Itsuki grinned as he watched the two of them joke around.

“Did something happen?”

“Nah, nothing.”

Itsuki smiled in amusement and started walking off in the direction of the cafeteria. Amane and Yuuta followed after him.

After dinner, Amane asked Mahiru “…You’re sulking, aren’t you?” She had seemed upset about something lately.

Mahiru blinked dramatically. “…Oh, did it show on my face?” She poked and prodded at her own cheeks, as if she was just discovering her sour expression.

“Yeah, well, you just look like you’re in a bad mood. I’ve been racking my brain for what I might have done wrong.”

Usually when Mahiru was sulking, it was because Amane had done something. But today he had barely interacted with her, so he really had no clue what the cause might be.

“If I did something, I’ll apologize, but—”

“N-no, this isn’t your fault, Amane-kun. I’m just being narrow-minded.”

“If you’re narrow-minded, that would mean most people’s minds could be measured in millimeters. Anyway, I’m still not convinced I didn’t do something.”

There was no way that Mahiru, the girl who basically never got angry, who was always ready to hear someone out or put herself in another person’s shoes, could be narrow-minded. Or if she was, then someone like Amane had to be the narrowest.

He wasn’t sure why Mahiru was sulking, but he figured there had to be some reason for it. And Mahiru wasn’t the type of person to let a stranger bother her, so nine times out of ten, if she was sulking, it meant that Amane, the only boy she let her inside her guard, was at the root of it all.

“…It really isn’t your fault, Amane-kun, but… Well, it does have something to do with you…”

“I don’t really understand, but if I’m the reason…”

“You shouldn’t apologize when you don’t understand why. Actually, I’m probably the one who should apologize to you.”

“Now I’m even more confused.”

“It’s because I’m so narrow-minded.”

“Okay, okay, assuming for the sake of argument that you are narrow-minded, what exactly is bothering you?”

He didn’t think that was even slightly accurate, but for the sake of moving the discussion forward, he agreed to pretend like it was true.

Mahiru refused to look directly at him.

"…I think it's unfair."

"Unfair?"

"Kadowaki-san."

"What about him?"

"It's not fair that he can go talk to you whenever, just because you're both boys. Meanwhile, I still have to hold back."

"Hold back?"

"To avoid causing any trouble…to keep from arousing too many suspicions…to preserve your precious quiet life, we have to act like strangers at school. But…it's making me lonely, and I'm the only one left out."

She must have been feeling isolated.

At school, Mahiru was still acting like an angel, just as she always had. She gave Amane the same smile as everyone else and kept him at the same distance she used with all the other boys. The thoroughness of her act was rather impressive.

But apparently Mahiru wanted to talk to Amane more than usual. She had been refraining from doing so because it would have all sorts of effects on their school lives, but now that Yuuta, another popular student who also had problems with the opposite sex, had made friends with Amane, she was finding her restrictions too limiting.

He hated hearing she was lonely, but he didn't think there was anything they could really do about that. He frowned, and so did Mahiru. She looked utterly dejected.

"Akazawa-san, Chitose-san and Kadowaki-san—they all get to have fun with you, Amane-kun, but I alone get left out."

"Argh…"

He couldn't stand hearing her say that with such a sad look on her face.

Amane had always talked to Chitose normally, so he was able to talk to her and Itsuki, the two people who knew about his friendship with Mahiru, at school like he always had. But he couldn't talk to Mahiru, so when Chitose came over to talk to Itsuki, that naturally meant Mahiru was left alone.

She seemed to have some other friends in their class, but she wasn't as open with them as she was with Chitose, so no matter what, she seemed a little lonely. Of course, she concealed those roiling emotions behind her angelic smile, but Amane knew her well enough that her loneliness stood out to him clear as day.

He understood that, and he wished he could do something about it, but of course he couldn't just nod and say he'd start talking to her whenever she wanted.

"…But, well, it would be strange if the class angel suddenly became good friends with a boring background character like me, wouldn't it?"

“Why do you always put yourself down like that? It really bothers me.” Mahiru frowned again and angrily jabbed Amane’s nose with the tip of her index finger. “I overheard the three of you talking today, and you should really stop being so self-deprecating. I wouldn’t even bother making friends with you if everything was really so calculated and cold. Think about what an absolute slob you were when I first met you. Imagine how you looked from my perspective. What did I have to gain by getting to know you?”

“You’re frighteningly persuasive.”

Their friendship had started because Mahiru had felt concerned for Amane, particularly because of his diet. A dash of guilt may have played a part as well. There was little other reason for the two of them to get to know each other. Looking at it objectively, their friendship made no sense.

But they had become friends anyway, and it had nothing to do with either of them weighing risks against rewards—it was because of the way they felt about each other, feelings that ranged from happiness to guilt to compassion. Those feelings had been the spark that led them to get to know each other better.

“Of course, now I know you’re a kind person with a good personality, so it would be an easy exercise if someone asked me to outline the merits of being friends with you, but I don’t care about any of that. I like you for you, and I’m sure Kadowaki-san has his own reasons, as he said. So it’s not good for you to paint yourself in such a negative light. That insistence of yours is an insult to all the people who care about you.”

“…Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize with such a glum face. I just want you to have more self-confidence.”

He still felt a little sting from being poked at, but that pain wasn’t a bad thing.

“Anyway, we’ve got to work on your low self-esteem. You need to be more confident.”

“Confident, huh? Well, see…”

“Even better, I’ll start spreading the news that you’re a great guy.”

“If you do that to me, I’ll die of shame, and everyone will wonder what you’re talking about.”

It would be sure to raise a lot of suspicions if Mahiru suddenly started praising some random guy that, as far as their peers were concerned, she didn’t really know very well.

“I’ll do my best to make sure it doesn’t seem unnatural, okay?”

“I guess that means you’ve decided you’re going to talk to me at school?”

"…Look, I don't like being the only one left out. If you don't mind, I want to spend time with you just like everybody else."

Whether or not she was aware that Amane found it almost impossible to resist the disheartened face she was making, Mahiru was casting her eyes low and mumbling sadly in a way that made him feel like he would go mad.

"…It's not that I hate the idea, but if we suddenly start acting all buddy-buddy, people are going to notice something's up."

"So if I do it gradually, that's all right?"

There was no way he could reject her any longer once he saw her eyes light up and her depressed expression change, so Amane nodded in assent.

"Just try not to hype me up too much, okay?"

"Fine… If that's what you want, I'll never compliment you ever again."

It hurt to hear her say that, but Amane held his tongue and just gazed off into the distance. His school life was about to become a bit stormier.

Chapter 5

Contact with the Angel and the Reaction from Others

After Mahiru declared her intent to have more frequent contact with Amane, she made good on her promise and began to approach him more often. At first, this amounted to nothing more than greetings and small talk, so as not to draw undue attention or give anyone reasons to think he might be more than a friend of a friend. Mahiru was obviously taking great care to avoid any sudden disruptions to his daily life.

When they discussed their studies, like classmates often did, they didn't get stares of jealousy—instead, the other students looked at them with admiration. At times like these, Amane was grateful that studying came easily to him. Honestly, it was difficult to keep up with Mahiru, since she usually did the whole year's worth of schoolwork in advance, but Mahiru was kind enough to tailor the discussion to Amane's level of understanding, so they were able to play the part of ordinary classmates without any trouble. It also helped that Chitose and Itsuki, and sometimes even Yuuta, were usually with them.

In the way that all people ease into gradual change, Amane got used to having light conversations with Mahiru about daily life or their mutual friends or their classes, and any looks of jealousy that might have been directed at him from other boys faded into the background. Only the boys in love with Mahiru continued giving him sharp glares.

"Why Fujimiya…?"

Amane was in his seat in the classroom, staring at his textbooks, when he happened to overhear some boys sitting near him whispering in resentful tones.

Until just a moment ago, Amane had been discussing the previous class's homework with Mahiru, and apparently the boys had spotted them.

As for why Mahiru had chosen to have that discussion with Amane, it was because there simply weren't that many people who could keep up with her on that topic. Chitose, her closest friend, never prepared for class, so there was no way she really understood everything they were supposed to be learning right now. Chitose's boyfriend, Itsuki, was the same.

And so when it came to academic topics, it was easier to talk to Amane. He'd always had an easy time with schoolwork, and now that he had Mahiru's guidance, he'd become an even better student than before. This was the power of Mahiru the angel.

"What do you mean, why me?" Amane answered loudly. "I happen to be able to follow along with what she's talking about. It's not like we were having some hot-and-heavy conversation over here."

When it came to interactions with Mahiru at school, there was some occasional small talk, but it was mostly about their studies.

Mahiru seemed to be taking her time approaching him, so no one would suspect anything, and was careful not to talk about anything normal classmates wouldn't share. Rather, they had been having conversations befitting exemplary students, serious conversations that left no room for doubt.

"I guess that's probably true, but…"

"If you've got a problem with it, you guys should get to studying and come join the discussion," Amane continued. "Having you guys look at me all jealous is a real pain. Studying is what we're here to do."

"Huh, no way… I don't get that stuff… I already have no idea what you two were even talking about…"

"Just read the textbook," Amane admonished. "All we're doing is looking ahead of the material we're learning now. If that's impossible for you, then I don't know what to say other than give up now."

"That's harsh…"

"Don't blame me for the sorry state of your studies. And anyway, I don't know what you guys are thinking, but I'm not that close with Shiina."

Amane answered them dispassionately, and the other boys ground their teeth in frustration. He wasn't particularly good friends with any of them—in fact, he saw them all as enemies who might discover his relationship with Mahiru—so he felt no obligation to be overly accommodating.

Mahiru was only starting with light, casual conversation as a way to steadily work up to being his friend openly at school. That meant they talked about schoolwork a lot, but even if any of these other boys were on top of their studies, he doubted whether she would befriend any of them.

Amane did his best to look utterly disinterested, but the two boys who were speaking to him stared at him suspiciously.

"You…you don't seem bothered by the fact that you and Shiina-san only talk about school stuff…"

"Don't you have any interest in the angel, Fujimiya?"

"Not in the angel, no."

Amane hadn't fallen for the "angel." That wasn't a lie.

The one he loved wasn't the angel—it was the real Mahiru, the side of her she only let him see. He loved the Mahiru who could be infuriatingly stubborn and sarcastic but was also tenderhearted and shy, the one who tended to indulge him, who had a penchant for feeling lonely, and who sometimes looked so fragile he worried she might break into a million pieces.

According to Mahiru, the angel persona was like a combat uniform she put on to go outside, a set of armor she wore to protect her vulnerable interior. And it wasn't as if he loved the armor. Of course, after all was said and done, that didn't change the fact that he liked Mahiru, but it was for more than just her public facade.

The two boys now seemed suspicious of how readily Amane had shut that line of questioning down. He dismissed without hesitation the idea that he was interested in the angel, and they looked at him in disbelief.

"…You're telling me you don't think she's cute, Fujimiya?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not interested in boys, either. Look, I've got eyes. It's not that I don't think she's cute—I mean, she's obviously very beautiful, and she has a good personality. But that doesn't mean I have to fall in love with her or anything."

"Then what *do* you like, Fujimiya?!"

The boys made a dissatisfied racket, causing their classmates to glance over, which was slightly awkward.

Leaving aside the fact that he was actually enamored with Mahiru, Amane didn't understand the reasoning that just because there was a cute, kind, perfect girl around that he must, as a member of the opposite sex, be in love with her. If that was true, wouldn't every boy in school be lovestruck?

Just looking around their classroom, it was clear that not every single boy was head over heels for Mahiru. There were people who appreciated her as one would a piece of art, and there were plenty of boys who were in love with other girls. Of course, that didn't change the fact that she was extremely easy to idolize.

"Lemme ask you: What do you guys like about the angel?" Amane muttered with some exasperation, and the two boys' expressions became lively, as if they were finally interested.

"She's super cute, and nice to everyone, and so neat and ladylike, and she can do anything! Wouldn't it just be the greatest to have her as your girlfriend?"

"Huh…right…," Amane mumbled. He knew what they were trying to say, but he gave them a skeptical glance questioning whether those were reasons enough to love her.

"She really is beautiful, and her figure is ideal, too. Like an angel out of a daydream or something. I mean, she is an angel, but—"

"It's not just that she's cute and has a good personality; she seriously can do anything she tries her hand at. Even her figure is extraordinary. Though usually her assets are hidden under her uniform… But trust me, she looks amazing in her gym clothes. Insanely impressive."

"That's…crazy all right," Amane muttered.

"I like flat girls like Shirakawa, too, but man, you know, girls with big ones are just the best. It's every guy's dream."

"You guys are being rude. I think it'd be better if you all shut up now, for everyone's sake."

Amane was suddenly in a rather unpleasant mood.

He could feel the sharp stares trained in their direction from around the room, and even though he knew they weren't pointed at him, exactly, it was still enough to make his blood run cold. Amane didn't have to look to know just who was giving him the angriest glares. He was not looking forward to dealing with that later.

The last thing Amane wanted was for people to lump him together with these two louts, so he made a point of turning his attention to his textbook. Letting his eyes glide over the course material that he had been discussing with Mahiru earlier, he sighed softly at the two oafs beside him who had begun a particularly vulgar conversation, even for high school boys.

"…You know, I really don't think that Shiina is even going to take a second look at you if you keep going on and on about your urges in public."

Amane figured that most girls probably did not appreciate a guy who participated in that kind of dirty talk. All the more so if they themselves had full figures.

On top of that, he knew that Mahiru did not appreciate it when someone approached her just because of her physical appearance. In fact, it was likely to put her off if she suspected they were only interested in her body.

When Amane glanced over at where Mahiru was sitting, he knew the girls must have heard them, because Mahiru was patting Chitose's arm, trying to calm her friend's raging bloodlust.

Itsuki sometimes teased Chitose in private, but that was between the two of them. If some stranger started casually talking about her body, she had every reason to be furious.

Mahiru's angelic expression never faltered as she comforted her friend, but Amane got the feeling that she, too, looked angry somehow.

I didn't say anything, though…

In his mind, Amane offered this explanation to Mahiru, then shut out the conversation of his two annoying male classmates by focusing on his book.

The pair didn't seem to mind all the dirty looks they were getting, and Amane felt no obligation to step in. Or more accurately, he had already tried to stop them, and they were continuing nonetheless.

Amane quietly let out another heavy sigh when the boys started talking about how great the angel was.

The angel is probably only the angel because guys like you act like that.

He didn't voice the thought. The words just rolled around in his mouth and vanished without ever coming out.

"…Um, Shiina-san?"

That evening, Mahiru had gone to Amane's apartment as usual, but she was wearing a stormy expression. She was acting so differently that he unintentionally called her by her last name.

"What is it?"

Her reply was curt. She was definitely mad about something.

Seeing the fundamentally gentle and tolerant Mahiru so bothered gave Amane a bit of a stomachache.

"What's got you in a bad mood?"

"I am not in a bad mood."

"…No, you definitely are."

"Am not."

Mahiru was sitting next to him on the sofa, her expression unchanging. It wasn't exactly obvious that she was angry—more like she was oozing displeasure. It might have been more accurate to say that the air around her felt prickly.

Amane struggled to think of what might be aggravating her—then he remembered she had seen him talking to their classmates earlier that day.

"…Ah, maybe you think I joined in with those guys discussing your figure?"

If Mahiru thought that, he could understand why she would be upset. It probably wasn't very pleasant to picture the person you were sitting with drooling over your body.

Mahiru had stiffened at Amane's words, so his conjecture had probably been accurate.

"You overheard us, didn't you?"

"Yeah, well, uh… I heard that part of the conversation, but…"

"Sorry. That must have been awful for you to have to hear."

“No, I, um… I’m used to hearing comments about my appearance, and it’s not the first time someone’s remarked directly on my figure, so it was more like ‘Oh, I see.’”

Mahiru had been conducting herself as the angel for many years, and her statement was typical of a girl who never failed to put in the effort to maintain her good looks.

However, from the way Mahiru said it, Amane could tell she’d been the victim of harassment before, and he felt ashamed to belong to the same gender as anyone who would be so crude.

“Well, I was appalled they had the nerve to say those things in a place with girls around. I mean, their preferences are their own business, but if they had to get all worked up like that, you’d think they’d have the decency to at least do it somewhere in private. I can’t even imagine saying those kinds of things in front of all those people.”

“One hundred percent.”

The boys should have thought about the time and the place, but they clearly hadn’t. It had been inappropriate for them to have a conversation like that where other people could hear. Actually, as far as Amane was concerned, it was indecent to talk about that kind of thing at all.

“I noticed you were bothered by what they said, Amane-kun, and I could hear that you didn’t join in. The other girls were impressed, too.”

“Th-thank goodness… You know I wouldn’t want to get mixed up with that.”

“…If anything, it made me a bit worried. Maybe you focus a little too much on always being a gentleman…and not enough on remembering that you’re a man.”

“Isn’t that a little harsh?”

He felt irritated that his classmates, and even Mahiru, doubted his manliness.

“It’s the truth,” she said, turning away. She was still giving off hints that she was a little upset about something, and when she noticed Amane frowning, she hugged a cushion to her knees. “…Apparently you don’t consider me very attractive, which hurts my confidence.”

“And just what, exactly, brought you to that conclusion?”

“You apparently aren’t interested, for one.”

She must had heard him say he had no interest in the angel.

“Wait, what I said was that I don’t have any interest in the angel. The angel is the character you play at school, right? What I meant was that even though I’m interested in Mahiru, I don’t have much interest in Mahiru masquerading as the angel. I think it looks like a tough gig; that’s all.”

“…So you do find me attractive, then?”

“I’d have to be blind to think otherwise. You’re incredibly beautiful. As the person most often by your side, I can assure you of that.”

Amane couldn't imagine how anyone could see it any other way. After spending so much time with Mahiru, he had gotten to know many different facets of her personality and had come to regard her with great affection. His love for her only increased and never diminished. That alone was proof that she was appealing.

As Amane spoke, Mahiru began nervously pinching and tugging at the fabric of the cushion she was clutching. She couldn't seem to look him in the eye.

"I-if that's true, then it's fine, but…"

Mahiru squirmed and nodded like she was hesitating to say something, then buried her face in the cushion. Her ears were bright red, poking out from beneath her blond hair, and it was very obvious she was embarrassed.

When she got like this, he knew the only thing to do was give her some space, so Amane turned away, leaning against the sofa's armrest.

He knew if he didn't cool off, Mahiru would be sure to see it in his face when she recovered.

…If it embarrasses her so much, she could just not say anything.

As the two of them both considered their words, Amane let out a sigh too quiet for Mahiru to hear.

Chapter 6

The Angel in Cooking Class

"I'm looking forward to working with you."

Amane was normally never on the receiving end of Mahiru's angelic smile, so when she turned it on him, it made him want to groan.

"…Same here," he responded in a quiet voice.

As a rule, Amane never approached Mahiru at school, but he didn't have much choice if she was the one who approached him. But this time, it wasn't Mahiru's fault; instead, it was simply because they had decided to team up, as friends.

Their home economics class was going to feature a cooking segment in several days, and the students had been given the freedom to form their own teams, as well as the right to choose what dishes they were going to prepare. However, they were required to put together a menu that applied their lessons about nutrition, and they would be graded on that menu, so they needed to take it seriously.

There were, of course, many potential suitors hoping to be on the same team as Mahiru, but she formed a pair with her good friend Chitose, and her partner Chitose pulled in her boyfriend, Itsuki. Amane, who thought he was paired up with Itsuki, naturally came along with him, so from the outside it looked like he was with Mahiru. They were getting even more stares now, and Amane could already feel a stomachache coming on.

Chitose, the main culprit in a sense, was grinning cheekily as she arranged some nearby desks for them. "Ah-ha-ha! You look like you swallowed a bug, Amane!" she cackled.

"And whose fault do you think that is?" Amane replied.

Once they had pushed four desks together and taken their seats, Mahiru smiled at him apologetically, letting her angelic expression slip just a bit. "I'm sorry for intruding," she said gracefully.

"No, this isn't your fault," Amane insisted. "I'm just worried about whether I'm going to be stabbed by those daggers in everyone's eyes."

"It's just like Amane not to appreciate his good fortune," Chitose admonished.

"I just don't wanna hog all the good luck, is all."

It was probably just his imagination, but he thought he heard displeased voices quietly agreeing. All the other boys must have been clamoring for the chance to eat the angel's handmade food, and he knew they were angry to see it go to a guy who didn't even seem to want it that badly. He was being pierced by thorny gazes full of jealousy and envy.

"But you know I'll have a hard time if you're not with me, man," Itsuki added. "Besides, all the other teams are groups of friends."

"Hmm…" Amane couldn't argue that point.

He wasn't exactly an outcast or anything, but he certainly wasn't popular or charming enough to insert himself into another group of friends and expect to get along well. It would have been difficult for Amane alone to leave his group now that they were assembled.

"Just give up and accept your fate!" Itsuki insisted. "If you're gonna whine so much, maybe we never should have been friends in the first place!"

"…I don't regret being your friend."

"Oh, I'm getting all choked up!"

"Ugh, you know, maybe I'm starting to regret it after all," Amane shot back.

Itsuki pressed his hands to his face. "A cruel double cross!" he moaned dramatically, and then he cackled with cheerful laughter.

Amane was not particularly impressed with his friend's performance. He was just starting to think about pinching Itsuki's cheeks when he heard a quiet laugh mixed with a sigh.

Mahiru was smiling in amusement.

"I've thought this before, but you two really are good friends, aren't you? It's enough to make me jealous."

"…I guess."

Even though she already knew they were good friends, Mahiru was acting as if it was the first time she had ever mentioned it. Amane felt uncomfortable not being able to respond.

He was grateful she was keeping up the act, but when Mahiru pretended they were strangers like this, it also made him feel both embarrassed and frustrated.

Chitose had been listening to their exchange, and with a grin, she patted Mahiru on the shoulder. "Join in if you like, Mahirun!" she said.

"Hey, stop that," Amane scolded. "Don't try to get Shiina involved in your wild antics. You're bugging her."

"No, that's not the case at all," Mahiru insisted.

"See?"

“Don’t get carried away, Chitose.”

Chitose liked the idea of getting Amane and Mahiru together. Actually, she more than endorsed it—whenever she got the chance to steer the conversation, usually she made every attempt to push them together. That was fine when they were at Amane’s apartment, but they were currently in school, and he wanted to avoid doing anything that might draw attention.

“All right, enough with that stuff,” Amane declared. “We’ve got to choose our menu.”

They only had a limited time to decide on a menu before they would have to present their choice, so he insisted on making a quick decision in a bid to show the rest of the class he didn’t hold any particular feelings toward Mahiru.

Chitose looked somewhat dumbfounded. “You can’t cook, but you’re taking charge?”

“Rude,” Amane said, bristling. “I can make…omelets.”

“…You might call them omelets, but what you make is basically scrambled eggs,” Mahiru whispered quietly so only the three other people in her group could hear, causing Itsuki and Chitose to burst into a fit of giggles. Amane, still wary about being in public, shot Mahiru a slightly reproachful glance, but she wasn’t bothered by it at all.

Her expression was too much like her usual angelic smile, and Amane turned away sharply. Chitose and Itsuki grinned once more at his reaction, which was even more unbearable.

“How about you, Akazawa-san?” Mahiru asked. “How is your cooking?”

“Me? …Well, it’s good enough to keep me alive,” he replied.

“Ikkun can do pretty much anything around the house, you know,” Chitose added.

Itsuki, who could somehow manage to do most tasks if he put his mind to it, could also whip up a flawless meal. Naturally, it wasn’t as good as Mahiru’s cooking, but it was plenty good enough to survive.

“It’s ’cause my mom’s never at home, thanks to work. I even used to go over to Amane’s sometimes to make food for him. Don’t do that anymore, though, huh?”

Itsuki glanced over at Amane meaningfully, and Amane frowned, but Itsuki just smiled.

“I suppose that’s true.”

“…If you guys don’t shut up, everybody’s gonna find out what a loser I am.”

“Too late, bro.”

“Bit late, isn’t it?”

“You guys are way too in sync.”

“Heh-heh. Well, now you don’t have to worry about meals; isn’t that great?”

"…W-wait, I do make some effort!" Amane protested. "Sometimes I make something when I'm alone…"

He didn't think it was good to leave everything up to Mahiru, so on the weekends or when Mahiru wasn't around, he did take a stab at cooking. Of course, he stuck to simple recipes that could be made in the broiler or using the range.

Amane had gotten quite flustered, when for some reason Mahiru smiled at him affectionately and commended him. "How admirable."

There was a painful amount of meaning hidden in those words. Amane's cheek twitched.

She was probably teasing him because she was perfectly aware of how much Amane struggled when it came to cooking. Compared to Mahiru's cooking, his feeble efforts were comparable to a child's. She was probably amused by how terrible they were. But he was steadily making improvements—when he started, he couldn't do anything for himself—and he needed it to be said.

"Well, how about we decide on a menu for now?" Mahiru suggested. "Our grades depend on it."

Without making any overt reference to Amane's distressed state, Mahiru, still with a gentle smile, tapped the menu worksheet they needed to turn in to complete the assignment.

Mahiru was the best cook among them, so the group had quietly agreed to put Mahiru in charge. Even though Amane had learned to make a few things, he was still an amateur, especially when it came to creating a nutritionally balanced menu. So it made sense to follow Mahiru's lead. After all, she chose the menu for dinner practically every night.

After some discussion, the group decided on a *sanshoku soborodon*, a dish of minced meat, eggs, and vegetables served over rice, with miso soup and cellophane noodle salad on the side, plus almond jelly for dessert. Chitose was grinning from ear to ear at the menu.

Mahiru had casually included an egg dish, probably because she knew Amane liked them. That fact did not escape Chitose's and Itsuki's notice, and Amane hid behind his worksheet to avoid their taunting stares.

And then, on the actual day of the cooking class, Amane let out an exhausted sigh.

He was supposedly working as Mahiru's assistant, but really she was just babysitting him. He stood near Mahiru and watched her put on her apron, a sight he had grown accustomed to.

"I'm counting on you for support, okay, Fujimiya-san?" she said with a smile.

This wasn't any scheme of Chitose's. The group had simply decided that Amane was the least useful when it came to kitchen work. He even had a prior record—he'd cut his finger right in front of Mahiru—so they had thought it best not to let him handle anything too involved.

He could understand their reasoning, as all of them were equally intent on avoiding any bloodshed, and because they wanted to do their work quickly, since the students would be dismissed to lunch starting with the finished teams, so he didn't argue. However, he did still take the time to insist, rather loudly, that he "…wasn't exactly totally incapable."

"…Are you sulking?" Mahiru asked him stealthily once she'd finished preparing the vegetables.

As he was measuring out the seasonings, without looking at her, Amane replied, "No, of course not. I just feel like I'm being unfairly judged."

"No one's judging you. It's just, well…um, you can't deny that the rest of us are more efficient."

"I certainly can't."

It went without saying that Mahiru could cook, and Amane had eaten Itsuki's cooking before, so he knew Itsuki could handle himself in the kitchen just fine, and as long as Chitose didn't do anything crazy with the seasonings, she could be expected to perform reasonably well. Amane wasn't entirely helpless, but he was objectively less capable than the three of them, so he couldn't really shoot back if they teased him on that point.

"And so I think it's best to get you to work in your area of strength. Also, Chitose-san's liable to get carried away with the seasonings, so I think we'd better leave that up to you, Fujimiya-san… It's an important job, you know."

"That's a serious responsibility…is what I thought at first, but I just have to follow the recipe, right?"

"Preventing a Chitose-san surprise before it happens is also a crucial job."

Mahiru let a giggle slip out, and Amane glanced over at Chitose.

She was simmering rice in a pot while cleaning up after she and Itsuki had prepared the almond jelly and placed it in the refrigerator. There probably weren't any pranks in the jelly.

Chitose didn't have an unsophisticated palate, but she did strangely enjoy extreme flavors and surprises, so Itsuki had been tasked with supervising her to guard against any of that. Plus, this way she could work alongside her boyfriend.

Laughing quietly, Mahiru pulled out the bean sprouts and carrots that had finished simmering in their basket, so Amane pulled off two or three sheets of paper towel from the roll sitting on the counter.

"Fujimiya-san?"

"Yeah, got it."

Mahiru handed him the boiled vegetables in their basket, so Amane chilled them slightly and used the paper towels to sponge off some of the moisture, then threw them into the bowl of seasonings he had prepared in advance, along with the rinsed cellophane noodles and julienned cucumber and ham.

Recalling Mahiru's welcome words that cooking wasn't such a difficult thing as long as you measured correctly and paid attention to the instructions, Amane performed his tasks according to the recipe. The chef had left him with the simplest jobs, so there wasn't exactly a ton to be proud of, though.

"After I stir in the sesame seeds, I can put this in the refrigerator, right?" he asked.

"That's right, and then…"

"Put the noodles in and take the minced meat out."

The simmering rice was almost ready, so he figured she was planning to get the bowls out before too long.

Mahiru watched as he covered the bowl containing the noodle salad with plastic wrap and wrote their team number on it. Apparently, he'd done it right, as she started to ready the frying pan without making any corrections.

The vegetables for the miso soup were already done cooking, and they just needed to dissolve the miso paste. Chitose and Itsuki had put the almond jelly in the refrigerator to chill and congeal, so all that was left was to get the rice bowls ready.

Taking care not to bump anyone on the way, Amane exchanged minced meat for noodle salad in the fridge and returned to their station.

As he was walking back to his own group's station, he took a sidelong glance at the other teams. Some were doing all right, while others were bickering. One of the teams made up of all boys was playing around and wasting ingredients, and the teacher who was overseeing this exercise in student autonomy was glaring sharply at them.

…Seeing that makes me glad I have Mahiru with me.

The fact that Amane's team had been able to do their work more smoothly than other teams was thanks to Mahiru's great familiarity with the cooking process and also because they'd chosen a menu that wasn't too demanding.

"Rather than showing off with some complicated menu, it'll be easier to make a meal that's nutritious and doesn't take too much time. Food is something you have to make every day, so you shouldn't fixate on things that tire you out, right?"

Amane had asked her at home about her reasoning for the menu, and that's how she had answered. He thought it was a rational way of thinking, typical of Mahiru, who made dinner for the two of them every night.

From Amane's perspective, even this simple menu took plenty of work to get right, so this cooking class was bringing him a renewed appreciation of Mahiru's worth.

Musing seriously to himself that the people in charge of the kitchens of the world must have a hard time making every meal, he returned to their counter, where Mahiru was giving Chitose instructions. Itsuki was nowhere to be seen, but Mahiru must have understood his unspoken question from the look in his eyes, because she promptly informed him, "I asked Akazawa-san to go fetch the dishes from the other room." She continued, "All right then, I'm entrusting the meat to you."

"Got it," Amane replied. "Cook it until the juice dries up, right?"

"That's right. Thanks."

Mahiru seemed to be working on the yellow and green portions of the tricolor rice bowl. She boiled water to parboil the spinach as she cracked and scrambled the eggs. Mahiru had finished preparing the frying pan for use, leaving Amane with only the simple task of heating the mixture of meat and seasonings.

As she used a cloth to dry the pot she had used and washed, Chitose watched him frying the meat with a strange look in her eye. "…I thought you couldn't cook?"

"I keep telling you, I'm not completely helpless. I just look bad next to her; that's all."

The job he'd been assigned was to simmer the meat and seasonings, stirring the mixture with a wooden spatula until the moisture had evaporated. He was offended that she assumed he couldn't even manage this much. It wasn't like they were comic book characters cooking up dark matter here.

Amane figured that most recipes got messed up when the cook used too much heat, timed things poorly, or added too many ingredients. But they had Mahiru to guide them, so they practically could not fail.

"If you must know, I memorized the recipe so I wouldn't get in the way."

"How thoughtful of you, Amane."

"Well, if I didn't pull my weight, the other guys would kill me."

He could feel them trying to stare daggers through him and could almost hear their thoughts (*…Is he gonna enjoy the angel's hand-cooked meal without working for it…?*) So he was trying to do something, at least.

Amane was fully aware that he was not naturally gifted at cooking, so he had studied the recipe even more seriously than he would a textbook, but Mahiru had laughed

at him. *"You don't have to take it that seriously*," she had said at home, but he knew he ought to be ready just in case.

Amane checked that the meat was browning and had started giving off a salty-sweet aroma, and he stirred it appropriately with the wooden spatula so it wouldn't burn.

Beside him, Mahiru was using the other burner to cook scrambled eggs. Amane felt a little embarrassed that she was making more than the usual amount because she knew how much he loved eggs, but he was also happy she was thinking of him.

"Shiina, do I let this go a little longer?" he asked.

"That's right," Mahiru answered. "You should let it boil down a little bit more. But it'll get dry if you simmer it too long, so please take it off the heat in about one minute."

"Mm, got it." He nodded.

Most of the moisture had already been cooked off, so he stirred the mixture with his spatula to keep it from burning while Mahiru went back to her own work without saying anything further.

Chitose was watching Amane and Mahiru from the side, and she shrugged, looking slightly amazed. "…You know, the two of you seem, well, what can I say…? It's like you're newlyw—"

"Chitose-san, please mind the miso soup."

"Eeep, yes, ma'am!"

Chitose let out an idiotic shriek for some reason and went to take the miso soup out of the refrigerator.

Amane quickly looked over to Mahiru. "…Did something happen?"

"Nothing at all."

It didn't seem like nothing at all, but Mahiru didn't seem likely to tell him more, so he gave up on getting any more information out of her and turned off the burner he had been using to fry the meat.

By the time Mahiru had finished cooking the eggs and sliced and dressed the parboiled spinach with seasonings, Itsuki had returned with the dishes.

"Aren't you a bit late?"

"Yeah, sorry. Some folks from the other teams came to talk to me."

Itsuki smiled flippantly, but his face didn't really look like he was joking around. He wasn't the type to skip out on something like this, so he probably had actually gotten held up talking to someone and couldn't extract himself right away.

It wasn't clear who he had spoken with or what they had talked about, but Amane got the sense that it had something to do with Mahiru. Without her nearby, their jealous

classmates could speak freely, so they had probably directed their complaints at Itsuki in Amane's stead. Of course, this was all conjecture; he didn't really know.

"Well, at any rate, I did my job, so…" Itsuki pointed to a tray bearing the right number of plates and bowls.

Mahiru smiled gently at him. "Everything's ready. Let's arrange it and take a photo for our report, then help ourselves, shall we?"

"Hell yeah!" Itsuki cheered. "I'm starving."

"That's 'cause you skipped breakfast, isn't it?" Chitose remarked.

"Not my fault; I overslept. Can I have an extra-big portion?"

"I don't mind," Mahiru replied. "I'm going to get the noodle salad now, so please arrange things in the meanwhile."

Amane quickly spoke up. "I'll go with you, then. We've got to put the almond jelly with everything else for the photo."

Amane said he would help, figuring Mahiru wouldn't have enough hands to carry the dessert as well, and she nodded at him with her calm smile.

A little too late, he realized he should have sent Chitose, mostly to get it done without inviting unnecessary speculation, but there was no going back now. Amane deliberately kept a little distance between them as they headed for the refrigerator in the rear of the kitchen classroom.

None of the other teams had Mahiru in their corner, so most of them weren't finished yet. As usual, a few groups were only half-heartedly working through the exercise. Amane thought it looked like they were going to get awful grades as he walked past them indifferently.

There was even a team of boys who were chatting and fooling around instead of cooking. One of them held his frying pan in one hand and laughed as he leaned away from the table with an exaggerated movement—right into the path of a girl carrying a pot full of soup.

In that instant, Amane sensed impending disaster and pulled Mahiru out of the way.

A few seconds later, he heard a loud splash followed by the faint, permeating smell of milk as hot steam whirled around him.

The girl must have been making a cream soup, given the half a cup or so of thick white liquid that was currently spreading across the floor. He peeled his eyes away to confirm that none had splashed on Mahiru.

"Shiina, are you burned?"

"…Ah, no, it didn't hit me, but…"

Mahiru looked frozen with surprise.

The girl who had spilled her soup looked apologetic, and the face of the boy with the frying pan who had bumped into her was ghastly pale.

"Did any of it hit you?" Amane asked the girl with the soup.

"Ah, n-no, I'm all right. S-sorry…!"

"It's okay. None of it hit me or Shiina, either."

Luckily, he had been quick to notice the danger, and neither Mahiru nor Amane was injured.

He was quick to wave his hand and reassure his female classmate, who had set the pot on a burner for the time being to apologize, while shooting a glance over at the boy who had collided with her.

As one would expect, the other boys who had been joking around with him kept their mouths shut, maybe because they felt guilty. They were looking practically everywhere except in Mahiru's direction.

"…Look, guys, it's fine to live it up a little, but you can't mess around in a place with fire and knives and stuff," Amane said. "If someone got hurt and it left a permanent mark, you'd never forgive yourselves. Thank goodness nothing happened this time, but what would you have done if you'd hurt one of the girls? Could you take responsibility for that?"

It would be no laughing matter if someone got burned—or cut with a knife—and came away from the incident with a scar. Amane wouldn't mind if he got hurt a little bit, but it would be a serious problem if he injured another person, especially a girl.

Many girls, and even a lot of guys, would be pretty upset if they were left with a nasty injury. And if someone got seriously hurt in a stupid accident like this, it wouldn't be strange if they held a grudge.

Whether the wounded party was Mahiru or the other girl didn't matter. Someone acting irresponsibly in a way that could cause injury to another person made Amane angry, and he felt compelled to speak up.

Amane was usually very quiet and mostly kept to himself, so when the guilty boy, who looked like he didn't expect to be told off, saw his narrowed eyes and heard his sharp tone, he quickly tendered a disheartened apology.

"S-sorry…"

Realizing that if he spoke too forcefully, he was likely to cause a fight, Amane switched to a more mellow tone of voice. "You don't need to apologize to me, but you'd better apologize to Yamazaki, who you ran into, and to Shiina, who nearly got splashed. Anyway, be more careful next time. The kitchen can be a dangerous place."

Then he looked at Mahiru.

He'd had one arm wrapped around her the entire time, and Mahiru's face had gone slightly red. Though he felt some regret over touching her like that, it was too late to worry about that now, so he gently released her and, taking care not to make any strange faces, pointed toward the refrigerator.

"Shiina, I'm sorry for touching you without your permission. Please, go ahead and take the salad over to our team. I'm going to help wipe up here."

"I-it's all right; I might have gotten jostled, but I'm the one who spilled everything," Yamazaki, the girl with the soup, stammered.

"Well anyway, I was involved, too, and all my team has left to do now is eat. It won't take long, so don't worry about it."

She had only spilled a little bit, so cleaning it up wouldn't take that much time.

After reassuring his distressed classmate, Amane got the teacher's permission and pulled off several sheets of paper towel from the roll on the counter and mopped up the soup.

The small amount of liquid was quickly absorbed by the handful of towels. Right as Amane was thinking that all he needed to do now was wipe it down with a wet towel, Mahiru appeared from somewhere with a damp cloth in hand and did just that.

"It'll go faster if we work together," she murmured. Then she gave Amane an angelic smile from up close, which was deeply unsettling for some reason.

"Welcome back!"

After they finished cleaning up, Amane and Mahiru returned to their table carrying the noodle salad and almond jelly about five minutes later than expected, and Chitose greeted them with an impish grin.

Amane's and Mahiru's portions, minus the salad and jelly, were already laid out on the table, so Amane divided everyone's share of cellophane noodle salad into the salad dishes and let out a sigh.

"I'm so tired…," Amane groaned.

"You looked pretty cool back there, man," Itsuki remarked. "And bold, for once."

"It's not like I was trying to cop a feel or anything," Amane insisted. "I had to get her out of the way of the soup, that's all."

He hadn't set out to embrace the angel or anything. And even though no one had criticized his split-second decision, several other boys did give him jealous looks that made him uncomfortable.

As for Mahiru, she frowned at him just the slightest bit when she heard what he said. Only someone who knew her well would have noticed this.

"Well, I feel like you really saved me. Thank you for holding me."

"I only did it because your apron or uniform might have gotten dirty, or even worse, you might have been burned. That guy seemed sorry, too, so that's good."

As one would expect, the boy who had caused the collision received all the blame. After all, they were in a place where a single misstep might result in a serious accident. At the moment, the boy in question was getting a serious tongue lashing from their teacher.

Amane was satisfied since ultimately no one had been hurt. And he hadn't been put at risk, either. Yes, he had touched Mahiru where everyone could see, which could have turned out worse than getting burned by hot soup. But judging by the atmosphere around the classroom, he seemed to have been forgiven for that slipup.

"So if you can be that brave in the face of danger," Itsuki remarked, "then why are you usually such a weenie?"

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" It was clear from the look in Amane's eyes and the tone of his voice that he was not interested in hearing whatever rude thing his friend was planning to say.

"Nothing at all," Itsuki grinned. "At any rate, we finished making our lunch without incident, so let's take that photo, yeah?" He quickly occupied himself by fiddling with the camera on his phone.

The students needed to check recipes and send in their photographs, so they were being allowed to use their phones in class, but not for playing around. Itsuki was obviously pointing his camera lens at people and not food, so Amane gave him an exasperated look, but Chitose excitedly pushed her way into the camera's view.

"You too, Mahirun!" she urged. "Get in, get in."

"You guys…," Amane groaned.

Mahiru blinked dramatically, then drew her seat over slightly closer to Amane's with a little smile.

Et tu, Mahiru…? Amane thought. He was surprised to see her flash him a quick, impish little grin, just for a second, before she donned her angelic smile again.

"Come on, you too, Ikkun," Chitose insisted.

"Wait, but who will take the…? Oh, perfect timing, Yuuta! Come take this picture."

"Huh, what's this all of a sudden?"

Yuuta just happened to be passing by, probably on his way back from the refrigerator, carrying a tray of thinly sliced pork. Itsuki pressed his smartphone into Yuuta's hand, then circled around behind Amane and flashed a peace sign.

Yuuta looked surprised by the sudden request, but when he saw the completed dishes lined up in front of Amane, he seemed to understand.

With a laugh, he said "Guess I've got no choice" and readied the smartphone. "You guys sure finished fast, huh? Okay, I'm taking it."

"That's 'cause we got hustle, man!"

"But you hardly did anything, Ikkun," Chitose ribbed.

"C'mon, don't say that; you promised!"

Amane laughed at his friend's ridiculous protests. Then he heard the sound of the camera shutter. He froze—Yuuta had taken the picture before he'd had time to compose himself.

"That's a good picture!" Yuuta said, before handing Itsuki his smartphone and leaving.

"Wow, it's not every day I get a picture with Amane smiling," Itsuki remarked.

"That's 'cause he usually has a sour face on, right?" Chitose said. "Send the picture to me, too, please!"

"Hoh-kay. Shiina-san, you get it from Chi, okay?"

Mahiru had already exchanged contact information with Itsuki, but in this situation, with people all around them, it was probably best not to say that out loud.

More importantly, it bothered Amane that Itsuki was sending the photo to Mahiru before letting him check it.

He shot a look over at Mahiru and got an adorable, albeit restrained, smile in response, so Amane could do nothing but groan and watch them quickly share the photo.

"…No one cares what my face looks like, so we might as well eat," Amane muttered, hoping to end the conversation there.

Itsuki gave him a big grin, so before his friend could return to his own seat, Amane poked him and turned away in a huff.

After that, Amane stuffed his face with the contents of the rice bowl Itsuki and Chitose had thoughtfully served up with heaps of egg, and he quickly forgot the shame of being photographed with a big grin. Mahiru just wore a happy smile, not paying Itsuki or Chitose any attention.

"Aaamaaaneee, starting today we're eating lunch with you, too!"

One day, several days after the cooking class, Chitose bounded over wearing a beaming smile, dragging Mahiru along behind her. Amane's cheek twitched.

He and Mahiru were acting less like acquaintances and more like regular friends around each other. They'd even begun chatting together in public. But Amane wondered if eating together might be moving too quickly.

Sure, if Chitose gave the pretense of coming over to eat with Itsuki, and Mahiru came with her, they could probably live under the assumption that Chitose had simply brought a friend. Their classmates shouldn't find that too enviable or suspicious, Amane thought.

Allowing herself to be pulled along by Chitose, Mahiru wore a gentle smile, conducting herself as she always did—like an angel.

But Amane was very troubled because he could also see something a little mischievous in her expression. "Ah, maybe I should move over?" he asked.

Chitose was obviously not going to let him get away that easily. "Don't worry about it! We're the ones who decided to join your table, after all."

Amane couldn't help feeling like this was Chitose's idea. But even when he glared at the smiling—no, grinning—Chitose, she didn't seem at all bothered.

She must have planned this with Itsuki, or maybe he was just happy to be eating with his girlfriend, because Itsuki gave his usual smile and said, "Great idea; let's all eat together."

Amane withered under the expected stares of jealousy from all around them.

"Oh, are Shirakawa-san and Shiina-san eating with us, too?" Yuuta asked as he stepped up to the table, looking like he intended to join them.

Amane's stomach started to ache.

"Yes, we were planning to sit with them today," Mahiru said.

"Really, now?!" Yuuta smiled. "Well, we should have a rather lively lunch, then!"

Amane was feeling anything but lively.

He wasn't upset with Yuuta.

He was just in complete shock that Mahiru had come over.

I'm so screwed.

"…Just give in, Amane; we've got you surrounded," Itsuki mumbled quietly enough that Yuuta couldn't hear, and Amane let out a huge, exhausted sigh.

"Do you usually bring your lunch to school, Shiina-san?" Yuuta asked, indicating the open lunch box in front of Mahiru.

Amane and Itsuki always ate lunch in the cafeteria, so Mahiru and the others, who usually ate in the classroom, had joined them.

Once each of the boys had returned to their seats carrying the lunches they had ordered, Yuuta became curious about Mahiru's lunch box.

Incidentally, Mahiru was sitting straight across from Amane. Chitose had encouraged her to take that seat, and there hadn't been an opening for Amane to escape.

"Yes, but usually it's just full of leftovers from dinner."

On weeknights, Mahiru often cooked things that would pack well into a lunch box, separating the leftovers into one portion for Amane's breakfast and one portion for her own lunch, so that was what she had packed today as well. He could see that the box contained the teriyaki chicken meatballs they had eaten yesterday.

"Wow, a homemade meal?"

"Yes. But really, it's nothing special."

"Mahirun, it's not nice to lie!" Chitose interrupted. "You're super talented at cooking."

"How about apprenticing with Shiina-san?" Itsuki added.

Chitose pouted. "Ikkun, you're so mean!"

"You just need to get her to teach you how to season things. You can cook the dishes themselves, but…your seasonings are strange."

As she clearly demonstrated during the cooking class the other day, Chitose was actually a fairly accomplished cook. It was just that her desire to cause mischief often led her to experiment with unorthodox flavors. Itsuki often complained that everything would be fine, if she just didn't have that bad habit.

"Okay, I'll get Mahirun to start a one-on-one cooking class. We'll get Amane to be the taste tester."

"I don't think so," Amane replied. "Besides, that'll make a lot of trouble for Shiina. Don't be so quick to say stuff like that."

"Actually, I don't think it'll be any trouble at all," Mahiru said. "I think I'd enjoy cooking with Chitose-san again."

"Yay! Mahirun, I love you! It'll be so much fun! Leave your calendar open, Amane!"

Chitose was sitting beside Mahiru, clinging tightly to her with a wide smile.

Mahiru was smiling, too, as she nodded in agreement. Amane felt deeply moved to realize they had become very close friends.

Chitose just set up a date with Mahiru, right here in front of everyone, just like that.

Whether it was part of a larger plot, he couldn't say. But when he looked at Chitose, he could see that she and Mahiru were smiling pleasantly at each other.

Amane's face twitched as he noticed all their nearby classmates had their ears pricked up, emanating waves of unvoiced jealousy.

"…Hey, Itsuki?" Amane asked.

"Hmm?"

"You think I have any chance of surviving this?"

"Eh, you'll be fine…probably."

He was getting dirty looks from Mahiru's fans, aka the boys who were madly in love with her. It wasn't just his imagination. This had clearly been Chitose's suggestion, so they weren't directing the full brunt of their bloodlust at him just yet, but he feared what might happen the next time Mahiru suggested something, especially once it became more obvious that they were good friends.

Yuuta leaned over. "That sounds like fun, huh, Fujimiya?"

"…If I were you, I could probably get through this without people being so jealous."

If Amane was attractive and talented like Yuuta, then people would see him and Mahiru as equals, and even if they were jealous, they'd think there was little to be done about it and simply give up.

"But I'm also jealous of you, Fujimiya."

"Jealous of what?"

"All sorts of stuff," Yuuta said cryptically. Then he laughed.

Amane couldn't do anything but tilt his head in puzzlement.

Itsuki chimed in, "Now, hold on a minute. There may be something to what Yuuta's saying."

"Seriously?"

"It's hard for people to recognize what they have. And those who have it can't understand the feelings of those who don't. On top of that, we all want what we don't have. Chi's definitely always whining about what she hasn't got."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, what's one thing that Shiina-san has plenty of but Chi doesn't have…?"

“You’re definitely thinking something perverted right now, aren’t you?” Chitose interrupted. Apparently, she had been listening to their conversation, and even though she was wearing a broad grin, her eyes were not smiling.

Realizing that this topic was a proverbial land mine, Amane shut his mouth and watched as Chitose and Itsuki started bantering back and forth. Then he glanced over at Mahiru. She looked perplexed at Chitose and Itsuki’s exchange, but when she met Amane’s eyes, her expression changed into a smile.

It wasn’t her angelic smile, but something closer to the happy yet bashful expression she let him see at home, so Amane got flustered and quickly averted his eyes.

“Were you surprised?”

At home, Mahiru was grinning impishly.

Amane couldn’t help but give her a wry smile back. “Surprised? I mean, I did think you came on pretty strong.”

“I know I said I was going to take it slow, but I thought it was about time to go to the next step. I’ve also recently realized we won’t make any progress if I don’t push you a little bit.”

“That’s true.”

She had probably been extra proactive because she knew Amane was constantly ready to flee, but in that setting, he had been surrounded and couldn’t get away easily.

Amane had been startled because he hadn’t expected Mahiru to be that pushy, but they had simply talked. She hadn’t tried to touch him or anything, so his mind was at ease.

If she had touched him innocently and casually like she did at home, he had no doubt that deadly blades of jealousy would have closed in on him for the kill. He depended on her, and she trusted him more than anyone else, but their classmates had no idea about any of that.

“I’m trying my best to take things bit by bit, so that it doesn’t shake up your routine too much. But Amane-kun, if something bothers you, please tell me, okay?”

Mahiru was perfectly aware of her popularity. Amane knew she was taking great pains not to become too friendly with him too quickly, all so their classmates wouldn’t get jealous. Typical Mahiru—her first concern was protecting him.

Still, he couldn’t deny that, this time, he felt like Chitose had gone a little too far. It was too late to do anything about it now, though, so he would just have to be more cautious moving forward.

“Well, it’s okay for the time being…,” Amane said. “Though, I do get jealous looks.”

“Oh really? That’s… Don’t you hate that…?”

Apparently, she was still concerned about the fact that Amane had been sullen at first.

“But now I understand you were lonely. We were wrong to leave a friend out, and it was obviously hard on you.”

“…A friend, huh?”

“Hmm?”

“No, nothing.”

It definitely seemed like something was bothering her, but Mahiru didn’t appear inclined to talk about it. When she turned away, Amane realized he must have done something to dampen her high spirits.

He went right ahead and stroked her hair.

“…You aren’t thinking you can solve everything just by patting my head a couple times, right?”

“I don’t, but I thought it might make you happy.”

“Well, it does, but…please don’t do it to just any girl when you’re trying to smooth things over.”

“I don’t do it to anyone but you, Mahiru…”

To begin with, the only other girl I’m friends with is Chitose. And there’s no way I’m doing this with her. Besides, I don’t think it would make her very happy. No, Mahiru’s the only person I’d ever do this with—and the only person I’d ever want to. She’s the only one I want to pamper.

Amane thought he had made it clear that he was being serious. But Mahiru still looked upset, and she pounded her fist into one of the cushions.

Amane started drawing his hand back and was surprised when she head-butted him in the upper arm. It didn’t hurt, but he was still shocked by how Mahiru had become noticeably more aggressive lately.

“…Amane-kun, you dummy.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just how hard do I have to try…?”

“I—I don’t really understand what you’re saying, but you’ll wear yourself out if you try anything too hard, so you should probably take it easy…”

“If I don’t prod you along, we’ll never get anywhere.”

Mahiru looked a bit resentful as he peeked over the top of his shoulder, and yet he thought he could see embarrassment and a touch of anticipation in her shimmering eyes.

Amane couldn’t bring himself to meet her gaze. “It r-really seems like you want something from me.”

"…I just want what happens next…"

Next—?

Mahiru must have wanted something further from Amane, but at the moment, she didn't seem to be making any additional requests, so for the time being, Amane decided to continue stroking her head gently and made every effort to please her.

Chapter 7

The Angel's Proposal

"Golden Week's pretty soon, huh?" Amane muttered quietly, gazing at the calendar on the shelf.

April had been a busy month, and he had been preoccupied with moving up a grade and Mahiru's big push to be friendly with him even at school. So before he knew it, the end of the month was fast approaching, and Golden Week, highly anticipated by students and adults alike, would soon be upon them.

Amane didn't particularly dislike his studies. Actually, if asked, he would say he enjoyed them. Going to school was a little bit of a hassle but not any great hardship, so he wasn't necessarily all that thrilled about the break. He simply thought it would be nice to have some more time to relax.

Unlike last year, this year Mahiru would be with him for Golden Week, so he wouldn't be bored.

Chitose had already claimed one of the days of his break for "taste testing at Mahiru's cooking class," so far from boring, his vacation promised to be eventful and probably difficult.

"Another long break is coming up…," Mahiru muttered.

"Yep, but is it me or do you not sound too thrilled?"

"It's not that I don't like breaks. I was just wondering how I'll kill the time."

Apparently Mahiru felt similarity. Both of them were homebodies, and they hadn't made any plans to speak of.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm happy enough to get a break, but I don't really have anything to do." Amane hadn't fallen behind in his schoolwork or anything, so he didn't feel like he needed to go out of his way to pack his vacation with studying.

He didn't have an especially strong desire to partake in his hobbies of walking or reading, and it wasn't like he needed to make plans for those anyway. Same with video games. He really didn't have any plans.

"…Amane-kun, are you free over the break?"

"I guess I am."

As things stood, all he had planned were his day as a taste tester for the impromptu cooking class and going to karaoke at some point with Itsuki and Yuuta. The break was a whole week long, so his schedule was still wide open.

He was about to say he'd most likely be relaxing at home, when he noticed Mahiru staring up at him.

"What's the matter?"

He met Mahiru's gaze and saw that she looked like she had something to say. She reached for her smartphone, which was on top of the table.

More accurately, she reached for the phone case.

Mahiru's phone case was the wallet type with spots to keep cards and such, and from one of the card slots, she pulled a small plastic bag with a zipper.

Inside it were a number of folded slips of paper, and Mahiru took one of them out and opened it up to show Amane.

Before he even had time to recognize it, he was looking at one of the DO ANYTHING YOU SAY coupons he had given her a little over a month earlier.

Mahiru held out the coupon, decorated with an illustration of a bear that Amane personally thought he had drawn quite well, and looked up at him pointedly again.

"Can I use it?"

"You can ask me to do anything you like."

"…Over Golden Week, I want one day with you," she said timidly. "I want to go shopping, and hang out, and whatever else I request. All right?"

Amane let out a quiet laugh. "Come on, I would go shopping and stuff with you if you asked. You don't really need to use a coupon for something so simple."

She probably wanted him to get all dressed up to take her out, but he would have done that for her anytime, so he didn't think she had to go to so much trouble.

He laughed at her using her request for such a trivial thing, but Mahiru shook her head with an earnest look in her eyes.

"Since I'm using the coupon…I get to ask for anything I feel like on that day."

"I-if you insist, that's fine, but…what are you planning to make me do?"

"…C-carry my bags."

"Yes, yes, as you wish."

He was tempted to crack a joke about her making him carry super-heavy bags, but Mahiru just nodded. Even Mahiru, who was at heart an indoor person, sometimes enjoyed going on an outing, and if she wanted him to accompany her, he intended to do just that, as much as she desired. Besides, it was sure to have its benefits.

Although Amane would have preferred not to start a fresh wave of rumors about Mahiru's mystery man, life would be dull if the fear of rumors kept them from going anywhere.

"So where do you plan on taking us?"

"Ah, I—I haven't decided yet, but—"

"You haven't decided…?"

"…I mean, I'm not sure what kinds of places you like, so…"

"Huh, me?"

"Well, if we're out together, I thought it would be nice to pick a place we could both enjoy. Is that all right?"

No one in the world could have refused Mahiru as she grabbed hold of his sleeve and looked up at him imploringly.

Amane's breath caught in his throat, and his eyes darted about in confusion. Then he roughly brushed back his hair and let out a small sigh.

"…I was just planning to go along with wherever you wanted to go, Mahiru, but well…in that case, there is one place I'd like to go."

It was difficult for him to go in alone, but it was someplace he always wanted to try going at least once.

"Where is that?"

"Promise not to laugh."

"I won't laugh."

"…A cat café."

That's right, a cat café, filled to the brim with adorable cats.

Amane liked animals a fair amount, but of course he wasn't able to keep a pet in an apartment and could only admire animals in magazines or other people's pets. But he was too afraid of what people might think if they saw a single guy going to an animal café. He was just too embarrassed to go.

However, if Mahiru was with him, he could go without worrying about other people's stares following him. They might stare for other reasons, but he felt like he could at least enter a café without reservations if Mahiru was by his side.

Besides all that, Amane also thought Mahiru would look very cute playing with cats, but of course he couldn't say that out loud.

"…Well, I th-thought that if we were together, I wouldn't be embarrassed. Do you mind?"

"N-no, not at all! All right then… Let's go together, shall we?"

"…Yeah."

Amane couldn't hide his nervousness. He felt both grateful and awkward that Mahiru had accepted his request. She giggled softly, and heat began to creep up Amane's face. Quickly, he changed the subject.

"What should we do after the café?"

"After that, we'll go shopping together, and…ah, I want to try going to an arcade. I've never been to a place like that."

Amane was not surprised to hear that the aristocratic Mahiru had never been to a game center. But she was apparently interested, so in that case, he was more than willing to take her to one and teach her the ropes.

The last game center he visited would probably have gotten a new shipment of stuffed animals she would like by now, and it would be fun to win them together.

"All right, sounds like that'll be good. We'll go to a cat café, eat lunch, go shopping, and go to a game center, okay?"

Amane sighed with relief once they had settled on their schedule for the day, and Mahiru looked up again so he could see her face.

"Yep, I'm really looking forward to it."

He nearly stopped breathing when she looked at him so bashfully.

"I can't wait for the break to be here," she added quietly, and to Amane, it sounded like she was looking forward to their outing from the bottom of her heart. She hugged the cushion tightly, clearly in a good mood.

Amane was momentarily stunned by her sweet smile. He could feel his heart pounding. "…Me too," he managed to reply hoarsely.

The surprise attack from the angel really made his heart ache.

Chapter 8

Fooling Around in the Angel's Cooking Classroom

"Welcome to the first-ever Mahirun Cooking Class!"

Chitose made this announcement with the rhythm and energy of a television cooking program's intro. Amane shot her an annoyed look.

Golden Week had started, and they had decided to hold Mahiru's cooking class on the first day of the break. The venue was Amane's apartment, for the simple reason that it was an easy place for Mahiru and Chitose to meet.

Chitose's family was at her house, so they wouldn't be able to get too noisy, and Mahiru had volunteered her place, but Amane had balked at going into a girl's apartment, so they had settled on his.

Wearing an apron, Chitose was getting herself all worked up. "Yaaay! We've invited Mahiru Shiina-san to be our lecturer for the course!"

Mahiru, too, was wearing her apron and a wry smile as she stood next to Chitose.

"You didn't invite her anywhere," Amane insisted. "You're also a guest here, you know."

"And as our taste tester…we've invited the extremely tiresome Amane Fujimiya-san!"

"Oh, shut up. Also, this is my house."

"He's no fun at all!"

Amane just couldn't keep up with Chitose's incredibly high-energy personality this early in the morning. It was just past nine. They had planned to finish cooking around lunchtime, so this was the only time they could meet.

Amane didn't really mind the hour, but Chitose was a lot to deal with right after waking up.

"…Sorry about this, first thing in the morning…," Mahiru apologized.

"No, it's fine. You are making me lunch, after all," Amane insisted. "Though, speaking of which, please keep an eye on Chitose so she doesn't put anything strange in it."

"O, ye of little faith!"

“Have you forgotten your previous offense on Valentine’s Day…?”

He still hadn’t forgotten the taste of her prank chocolates. The ones with nothing weird in them had been delicious, of course, but the taste of the surprise special chocolates had been shocking enough that he could recall it even now. And he couldn’t trust Chitose’s palate, since she claimed she had been able to eat those experimental pieces like regular sweets.

“Ah-ha-ha, but those were meant to be a prank. It’ll be fine if I’m cooking normally. Probably.”

“That ‘probably’ worries me, you ass… I’m begging you, please make something I can eat.”

“Don’t worry about it!” said Chitose confidently as she started rolling up her sleeves.

Amane felt a tinge of anxiety as he watched the girls set up, but he believed Mahiru would probably intervene on his behalf somehow.

Mahiru didn’t compromise on dishes she planned to serve to other people, and she was the one running this lesson, so Amane was confident they would make the food properly, and everything would be fine.

With Chitose in tow, Mahiru headed for his kitchen as if it were her own home and read out the names of the dishes on the day’s menu.

Namely, today’s lunch would consist of a quiche and salad, with shrimp bisque and a sauté of any excess ingredients. She had apparently decided to answer Amane’s request to include shrimp.

He was sure that everything would go okay, but he still worried about Chitose putting something strange into the quiche.

“…I feel like you’re being needlessly wary…,” Chitose protested. Maybe she had noticed him staring at her.

Amane averted his eyes and flopped down on the sofa. His job was to be a taste tester, so he didn’t really have to do anything, and that suited him just fine. He wasn’t totally useless as Mahiru’s helper, but that was Chitose’s role today, and anyway, he had been instructed by Mahiru to sit down, so he couldn’t move from his spot.

And so he had lots of free time.

He looked into the kitchen and saw the two girls in their aprons pleasantly chatting as they started their work.

They were both beautiful girls in different ways, and having them both here, wearing aprons and cooking in his apartment, would surely make any other boy in their class drool with envy, Amane mused, as if he were an uninvolved observer.

Fighting off a second round of anxiety over whether the practical jokester might pull something outrageous, Amane let his eyes drift closed, unsure of what else to do with his glut of free time.

Apparently, cooking class would take several hours, so they probably wouldn't mind if he took a little nap. It was his apartment, after all, so the only one who could blame him for anything was…Mahiru.

Amane let out a small yawn and made himself comfortable on the sofa.

When he came to, Amane detected a sweet scent nearby. It was an aroma he had become used to, a sweet fragrance that was milky and floral, hard to describe but extremely pleasant, so without thinking, he inhaled deeply.

In his barely conscious state, he brought his face closer to the source of the smell and felt something warm and soft to the touch. When he snuggled his cheek closer to the pleasant warmth, it started to squirm.

"…Ah, um, that tickles…," said a halting voice from somewhere very close by. Amane realized someone was patting his thigh. This quickly dragged his dim consciousness up to the surface, and when he pried open his heavy eyelids…what he saw was an expanse of smooth milky white.

He nervously lifted his head and found Mahiru's flushed face incredibly close to his. She looked very embarrassed.

"…Mahiru?"

"Yes?"

"…Uh…good morning?"

"Good morning. Although…actually, it's already time to say good afternoon."

He looked at the digital clock on the shelf and saw that it was past noon.

He had dozed off for quite a while, he realized. But what was Mahiru doing by his side?

"When I sat down next to you, you leaned onto me."

Mahiru answered his unspoken question, her cheeks still tinged slightly red.

Apparently, he had nestled his face into the area near her shoulder. The shirt she was wearing today had a fairly open neckline, which left some skin peeking out, and that seemed to be where he had stuck his face.

If he was unlucky, she might consider this a matter of sexual harassment, so he prepared himself for her anger, but Mahiru seemed more embarrassed than angry and just cast her eyes downward.

Personally, he would have preferred for her to get mad, because he was truly at a loss for what to do when she reacted that way. He appeared to have been forgiven, which made him uncomfortable.

"That's— I'm sorry," Amane apologized. "It must have been a pain."

"N-no, not at all!" she insisted.

"Quite the contrary, Mahirun said 'I'm going to take advantage of the fact that Amane-kun's half asleep' and sat down to catch your head."

"Chitose-san!" Mahiru turned even redder.

"And just when did you two start calling each other by your first names, I wonder?" Chitose grinned.

"…Chitose."

"Don't scowl at me, Amane. You're the one who was careless!"

He couldn't argue with that. In his half-conscious state, he'd called Mahiru by her first name even though Chitose was there. That was his error.

"And anyway, Mahirun already told me about how you two talk when no one else is around…"

"Look, you—," Amane growled.

"S-sorry," Mahiru mumbled.

He quickly shook his head. "No, you're not to blame here, Mahiru."

Chitose cackled merrily. "Well, as far as I'm concerned, I think it's just great that the two of you are getting so friendly! It's not a bad thing at all."

"You're a real pain, you know that?" Amane glared. "It's seriously not what you're thinking."

"Ohhh?"

"What?"

"Uh-uh, nothing. Nooothing at aaall!"

Chitose sure seemed like she had a lot to say about nothing, but she shrugged as if she had no intention of expressing it through words. Amane knew that when she got like this, it was no good trying to question her, so he gave up on asking her anything further.

Beside him, Mahiru looked slightly concerned.

"…Mahiru?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing."

Mahiru seemed to come to her senses when he spoke to her. She hurriedly put on a smile and shook her head, so he knew he couldn't question her any further, either. All he could do was shut his mouth.

"…So we made lunch as promised. Wanna eat?" Chitose asked.

"Sure. I can't believe I dozed off until lunch…"

"You slept like a log, so we had plenty of time to play around, looking at your sleeping face."

"…I don't suppose you pulled any pranks?"

"I did not!" Chitose insisted, though he knew better than to believe her. "What's got you so worried, young man?"

"You did something other than a prank, didn't you?" Amane asked suspiciously.

"I'm telling you: I didn't do a thing!"

"I wonder. Mahiru, did she do anything to the food?"

He looked over at Mahiru to confirm, but she must have been caught by surprise when he suddenly brought up the subject. She looked confused and smiled wryly.

"Chitose-san didn't do anything, but…"

"Really? If she did, I'm thinking of squeezing her until she pops—"

"No violence!"

Chitose was cackling with laughter even as she protested, and Amane could only sigh in exasperation.

Finally—though Amane didn't really feel as if any time had passed, since he had been asleep—it was indeed lunchtime.

Even Chitose seemed to have taken her cooking seriously for a change, and the table was set with a beautifully cooked quiche and a bisque soup that was giving off the rich aroma of shrimp.

They had served everything up on individual plates, so the salad, quiche, bisque, and shrimp sauté were carefully arranged to show off the rich array of colors. It looked like a lunch that might be served at a cute café.

"Wow, everything looks great!" Amane exclaimed. "…Mahiru, how's the flavor?"

"It's all fine." She nodded. "Chitose-san didn't add anything strange, and I tasted everything as we went."

"Great."

"You really don't trust me, geez! I made everything properly today, too. Rude."

Chitose was in a huff, but she had a history of launching surprise attacks right after saying something similar, so Amane knew better than to let his guard down. This time, though, Mahiru had been there to supervise, so Amane could mostly relax and eat.

"Ah, Mahirun made this quiche. I made one to give to Ikkun."

"You're gonna give him a whole quiche…?"

"It's a little one, about the size of my palm, so it's fine. Eh-heh-heh, I wonder if he'll be happy with it…?"

Chitose was wearing a big grin, and Mahiru was staring at her with a heartwarming smile of her own. As long as Chitose wasn't preoccupied playing pranks or getting up to some other kind of mischief, she was a pretty thoughtful girlfriend. Amane thought it was nice she had made something just for Itsuki.

But she did tend to take things too far, so it could be a little dangerous to trust her completely.

Amane also smiled a little at the beaming Mahiru, then turned his attention to the plate that had been set before him. He pressed his hands together. "All right, let's eat."

"Go ahead! Enjoy your meal!"

Chitose looked almost bashful. It was surprisingly endearing, and just for a moment, Amane was reminded that she was a girl, too, after all.

"…Um, I'm sorry."

After Chitose left, Mahiru suddenly apologized.

Amane wasn't sure why she was apologizing, and he looked with wide eyes at Mahiru sitting beside him. She had her legs drawn in and was fidgeting restlessly, wearing a guilty expression.

"…Sorry about the pranks."

"Pranks?"

"Chitose-san didn't do anything to you, but…well, I did."

"Huh, you did?"

He was certain Chitose had said she hadn't done anything when he interrogated her, and Mahiru had also confirmed that Chitose hadn't. But Mahiru hadn't said a single word about whether she herself had been up to no good.

Amane had never even considered that Mahiru might do something to him and had automatically excluded her from suspicion, but apparently she had been busy.

She looked guilty, like she wanted to run away at any moment.

"What did you do?"

"Well, I squished your cheeks…"

"…Does that really qualify as a prank?"

"A-and then I stared at your sleeping face, and I stroked your hair."

"Well, you do like doing that."

"…Y-yes."

"So…was that all?"

"…Yes."

The way she was acting, she seemed remorseful, but Amane wanted to joke that those things were hardly pranks. What Mahiru had done was less of a prank and more

like normal physical intimacy. If that was a prank, then that would mean Amane had also been messing with Mahiru, so he hoped she didn't think of it that way.

"I'm not really mad, you know. Like, as long as you were having fun, I guess it's fine; it was just careless of me to fall asleep in front of other people."

"Th-thank you…"

"I mean, I don't think it would be much fun to look at this ugly mug, but…"

"…You looked cute, you know?"

"You're just about the only person who would say a guy like me looked cute."

"That's not true. Chitose-san said so!"

"She was definitely making fun of me…"

In Chitose's case, she obviously said he looked cute because she thought it was funny. That was a different matter than Mahiru finding him cute. As a rule, nobody should ever take Chitose too seriously, he thought.

"…You really were cute."

"Really?"

"I played with your cheeks a lot…"

"I wonder, is it that much fun to poke at a guy's cheeks?"

"It's more fun than you realize."

Based on his own body, Amane thought guys' cheeks would be very stiff compared to girls' and therefore not that much fun to poke or play with. He didn't understand what Mahiru found so great about it, but if it was the very act of poking that she found enjoyable, then he supposed he shouldn't complain.

"Well, it's not like I can't relate," he said. "Your cheeks also feel nice to poke at."

He had played the same "prank" on Mahiru before.

That said, it wouldn't do to touch her too boldly, so he cautiously, gently poked her with the tip of his finger.

Mahiru's cheek was soft and a little squishy and undeniably feminine. She obviously took very good care of her skin, because it was smooth and lustrous. Just touching her like this felt amazing. Telling himself that if Mahiru had touched his face, he should be allowed to touch hers, Amane gently pinched her pliable cheek.

Mahiru looked up at him with a bit of dissatisfaction, and he knew he'd better not overdo it, so he stroked the cheek gently with the pad of his finger to mollify her. He moved gently and carefully, just like he would if he were petting a kitten.

"…Hmm."

Before long, the look of dissatisfaction faded and was replaced by a soft smile that seemed to be hiding something. It was such a sweet expression, he wondered if the secret ingredient was plenty of honey.

...She looks really relaxed.

He was surprised to see how relaxed Mahiru looked while a boy touched her like that. Then it occurred to him that Mahiru never let boys touch her, and he suddenly felt very embarrassed to be receiving such special treatment. It made him want to bang his head on the back of the sofa.

Trying to put such thoughts out of his mind, Amane reached his hand under Mahiru's chin, and this time he really moved his fingers like he was petting a cat.

"Hyah!" She let out a small yelp. "…Wh-what was that?"

"Practice for when we go to the cat café."

"What were you thinking? I'm not a cat, I'm a person!"

"It's because you're so catlike. But also kind of like a dog and a bunny at the same time."

"What are you talking about…?"

"Exactly what I said."

Recently, Amane had made the private observation that Mahiru at times acted like a cat, a dog, and even a rabbit. When he was first getting to know her, she had been a very wary cat, then as they became closer, she became friendly like a dog…not exactly the same, but she had definitely warmed up to him. As for the rabbit…for some reason, Amane had gotten it into his head that rabbits were lonely creatures, so he had just thrown that one in the mix for good measure.

Amane was glad she didn't hate being doted on, since he wanted to do exactly that. As he scratched under her chin, Mahiru quietly said "The top of my head would be better," so he obediently switched to stroking her head.

He decided not to mention that, at times like this, she was more doglike.

"…If I'm a cat and a dog and a bunny… In that case, Amane-kun, you're a wolf."

"Does that mean I attack girls…?"

"N-no, I don't mean it like that! Wolves seem to care about their companions a lot. I've heard they do anything to protect their pack. Well, since their packs are usually formed of family members, I guess it's a little different, but I say that because you take really good care of the people in your circle."

"…Well, I guess you've got me there."

Amane's circle of friends was pretty small. Small enough that he could count the people he would call friends on two hands. But he always tried to do the best he could for those people and treat them well. If she was going to call that facet of him wolflike, then he wasn't going to argue.

"B-besides…that's how I want you to be."

"That's how you want me to be?"

"…No, it's nothing. Don't worry about it. Um, also, your hair is fluffy, which is why you're like a wolf."

"That's not a trait of wolves."

Mahiru seemed like she had been about to say something different, but now she was stroking Amane's hair, so he didn't question her and just let her touch his hair as she pleased.

It was the day after the cooking class, and Mahiru apparently had plans to hang out with Chitose again, so she departed after preparing Amane's lunch.

Amane would have been perfectly capable of feeding himself without her help, but she went to all the trouble of cooking for him, so he wasn't about to complain.

He saw her off as she left his apartment, looking somewhat restless, then sighed as he wondered how he should spend his free time.

It was currently just past one thirty. Mahiru had gone out, and it wasn't a bad time for going out, but he didn't really feel like it since he had nothing in particular planned. If he'd had plans to hang out with someone, he could have probably summoned the willpower to leave the apartment, but if no one was waiting for him, then he figured he didn't need to go to the trouble.

That left him with the question of what to do with his day. There weren't that many ways he could kill time at home.

His most frequent pastimes were games and comics, but he had cleared all the scenarios in his role-playing games and even finished all the speedruns, and it wasn't all that interesting to play party games by himself.

So he was down to comics and novels, but Amane didn't typically keep a lot of books around, and he had already read the ones he had several times over and knew all the plots. Amane was a fast reader anyway, so he would probably breeze through a whole comic book series in an hour.

Amane was at a loss for what else he could do. For the moment, he went into his bedroom and opened the textbook that was lying on his desk.

Chitose would look so confused if she could see me now.

Amane didn't have much to do, and they did have homework even during Golden Week. And after Golden Week, midterm exams were waiting for them. He actually enjoyed studying a fair bit, so he figured it might be a good way to spend his day if he didn't have any other ideas.

One way or another, he had to get through their assigned homework, and he wanted to be able to enjoy tomorrow's outing without having it in the back of his mind

the whole time. So he decided it was best to go ahead and get his academic obligations out of the way.

Amane was naturally a serious student, and he pulled himself up to his desk, mechanical pencil in hand, to complete his schoolwork.

When he next noticed the time again, it was already past six o'clock.

Whenever Amane was seriously concentrating, he tended to tune everything else out. As he left his bedroom, rolling his shoulders around to loosen up his stiff body, he smiled at how the sunbeams that were filtering through the window had changed their angle bit by bit.

He could see the kitchen as soon as he was out in the hallway, and sure enough, there was Mahiru in her apron. She hadn't been there the last time he'd left his room to take a break.

Apparently, she had returned from her outing.

He wasn't sure if it was a good thing that he had been so focused he hadn't even noticed the sound of the door unlocking in the entryway, but he knew it wasn't good that he hadn't come out to greet her.

"Welcome back. Sorry I didn't greet you."

"No, it's fine… I didn't call out to you, either. I thought you were probably busy with something in your room."

"I was doing homework."

He had made plenty of progress in the quiet apartment, but he might have been studying too long, because his body was awfully stiff. He regretted not changing his posture a little more often while reading.

He did some light stretching while they talked, and Mahiru let out a small giggle.

"You're very studious."

"I'm the type who likes to get my work done ahead of time so I can enjoy myself."

"I'm much the same. Though I prefer to do my studying intermittently."

"You're even more serious about schoolwork than I am."

Generally speaking, Amane was also the type to study on and off and steadily etch things into his memory by repetition, but he wasn't as scrupulous and methodical as Mahiru.

Incidentally, he had learned over the last summer break that Itsuki would finish his work first and then really play around, while Chitose would play first and then drown in her own tears of regret, so he expected the latter half of summer vacation this year to be rough going.

“Once you make a habit of it, it’s really not that much trouble,” Mahiru explained. “Once it becomes second nature, you don’t think anything of it.”

“Impressive. I’ve got to put in some more work, until it becomes second nature.”

Most people assumed that Mahiru was some kind of prodigy, a genius blessed with a naturally brilliant mind. Those people didn’t know how hard she worked. Amane would never deny that she was very smart, but he knew that, above all else, she was a hard worker first and foremost.

She didn’t show it much on the surface, but behind the scenes, she never failed to put in the effort. That was why her grades and her looks and her athletics were all outstanding.

Amane knew how hard Mahiru worked, so he recognized and admired her efforts and didn’t begrudge her successes. Mahiru’s abilities were earned through being disciplined, and anyone who wanted the same for themselves would have to put in the same labor. Amane doubted he would ever be able to reach Mahiru’s level, but as someone who always wanted to improve his grades, he admired her.

Mahiru was frowning like something had tickled her. “Flattery will get you nowhere, mister. At best, you might get pudding after dinner.”

“Oh, then should I praise you more?”

“How calculated.”

Mahiru smiled like something was funny. Amane gave her a sidelong glance, but when he opened the refrigerator, he realized there really was pudding inside. It was store-bought, but it came from the patisserie that Chitose liked so much, and it was one of Amane’s favorites, too. Though Mahiru’s handmade pudding was the best, this was also sure to be delicious. A surge of happiness bubbled up within him.

Mahiru giggled when she saw Amane’s face light up all of a sudden, so he came back to his senses and felt a bit embarrassed.

“You really do love eggs, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

There was no need to hide it in front of Mahiru, who already had a thorough knowledge of his culinary preferences, so he meekly nodded in agreement.

Suddenly, Mahiru froze in place, still stiffly holding a potato she had just finished washing. Amane tried to look at her face to see what was the matter, but she quickly turned away.

“Mahiru?”

“…It’s nothing. More importantly, if you’re not going to help, I recommend you leave the kitchen.”

“So harsh all of a sudden. I actually came in here intending to help, but…”

Still, he wasn't going to make Mahiru do all the work alone. Besides, a little light activity would be just perfect for waking up his stiff limbs.

Amane grabbed his apron from the kitchen rack and put it on. Mahiru wordlessly put several washed potatoes in a bowl and handed it to him along with a peeler. She didn't look him in the eye the whole time.

"By the way, what are we going to make with these potatoes?"

"…I was planning to make potato salad, but now they're going to be ingredients for a frittata."

"Isn't that a pretty big change?"

"It's fine. I'm in charge of the kitchen. You just need to follow what I say."

"I—I don't really get it, but you make a good point."

This was Amane's kitchen, but Mahiru was in charge of the cooking, so this kitchen was actually under Mahiru's control. After all, Amane didn't know nearly as much about culinary matters as she did, so he was better off obediently following her lead.

Mahiru was obviously not in a good mood, and Amane wondered about her cold tone as he washed his hands and began to peel the potatoes. Fortunately, he didn't need to worry about injuring himself with a peeler.

Mahiru, meanwhile, had started her own tasks. It seemed like the change in menu had been pretty sudden, but Mahiru knew what was in the refrigerator best anyway, so Amane was sure there was no problem.

"…So what did you do today?"

The kitchen was spacious enough that the two of them could work side by side, and he wouldn't have minded working in silence, but Amane's task wasn't that hard, so he tried to strike up a conversation.

Mahiru's whole body twitched.

"Eh…um, well… I—I got her advice on something, I guess."

"Oh, was something giving you trouble? Did you sort it out?"

Honestly, Amane hoped Mahiru would come to him if she ever had a problem. But there were probably a lot of issues only another girl would fully understand, so he wasn't about to complain or anything.

"Y-yeah, sort of. I'll know for sure in a few days."

"Hmm. That's good, then."

If she had solved her problem, then Amane had nothing further to say, and he promptly shut his mouth, knowing it would be bad to pry.

Mahiru tugged nervously at her apron.

"…Amane-kun?"

“Hmm?”

“Uh, um, Amane-kun… Which style do you like better, simple and clean or more mature?” Her eyelashes fluttered as she peered at him with a troubling expression.

He didn’t ask why she was suddenly asking him such a question. He figured she must be trying to decide what kind of look was best for their outing tomorrow or something.

“I think it’s best when the style suits the person wearing it,” he finally answered.

“I’m asking about *your* preferences.”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s nice to see a woman in something that really suits her, but I think everyone should just wear what they feel comfortable in.”

“…I’m asking about your preferences.”

“Uh…”

Amane really thought it was best for Mahiru to wear whatever she liked, but she didn’t seem content to take that as his final answer.

“I really think either style is fine. A simple look suits your personality and looks cute, and a sophisticated look brings out your beauty more. I think either one looks great on you. There’s something to like about each of them, but I can’t say which look I like better unless I see the actual outfits.”

“…Y-you really do just come out and say things like that pretty bluntly, don’t you? Agh…”

“I mean, you asked. Hmm, I guess go with the simple look.”

He was getting the feeling that she wanted him to come out and pick one, so he obliged.

Mahiru turned away from him. “All right, I’ll do that,” she answered. “I’ll do my best to put together a look that will astonish even the calm and collected Amane-kun.”

“That seems like it won’t end up being very simple…”

“Fine, I’ll wear something that will make you lose your mind.”

“Don’t go too far; I won’t know what to do.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

Mahiru was being awfully forward today, but it was still adorable, just in a different way. Amane chuckled to himself and continued peeling potato skins.

Chapter 9

An Outing with the Angel

“Good morning, Amane-kun.”

Most people would start an outing by meeting up somewhere, but Mahiru met him at his apartment. Since she lived next door, they didn’t need to go to the trouble of arranging a meeting place. Instead, Mahiru came directly to his door.

She certainly did look different.

“Morning… Oh, you put your hair up today.”

“I thought it would get in the way if we’re going to be playing with cats. How do you like it?”

Mahiru usually wore her long hair down, but today it was braided and gathered up in a bun. It looked like a more complex version of what she did with it when she was cooking.

“Yeah, it looks good.”

“It’s nice of you to say so, but… W-well…if you’re going to laugh, just laugh, okay?”

“What are you talking about?”

“…You think it looks silly, don’t you?”

Mahiru was squeezing her arms tightly over her chest. Her outfit showed a little bit more skin than usual.

Putting it that way might make it seem like she was wearing a very exposing outfit, but her top was a chiffon blouse with an open collar, and the pure-white skin of her neck was peeking out, which just gave the illusion of more exposure.

The blouse had a long lantern sleeve with slits in the sides and lace panels that ran along the length so her upper arms were partially hidden but still showed through. It was subtly enticing.

Of course, she had an undershirt on, so it wasn't like he was at risk of seeing anything if he looked at her from above, but somehow he found the look both tidy and alluring in the way it enhanced her femininity.

On the bottom she was wearing skinny jeans, perhaps because she was preparing to play with cats at the café. The jeans fit tightly to her figure, hugging her slender legs.

On her wrist she wore the flower bracelet Amane had given her as a present. He remembered her saying she was going to wear it with care, and he felt a warmth in his chest.

"I don't think you look silly. In fact, I think you look even prettier than usual."

"Well, don't you look the part today? Your parents must have raised you to be a proper gentleman."

"Dad always told me that you ought to compliment a girl when she's all dressed up… Of course, it's not just flattery, you know."

"…I'll believe you."

Mahiru's face flushed slightly red, and she held her bag tight. Amane smiled wryly and almost patted her head, but he stopped himself. He expected she wouldn't be pleased if he messed up her elaborate hairdo before they even started their outing.

Mahiru blinked like she'd been expecting it but seemed to understand he was being considerate of her hair, and so she smiled at him. She did give Amane's hand a bit of a wary look, though.

"…Amane-kun, recently you've been a little obsessed with patting my head, haven't you?"

"If you don't like it, I'll stop. I know I shouldn't touch you too excessively."

"N-no, that's not what I meant… I, um, I want to be able to play with your hair, too, when I want to."

"That's fine; I don't mind, but you can't do it now. I've got wax in it."

Amane had donned his "mystery man" outfit to go out with Mahiru, taking the time to carefully arrange his hair. His outfit choice was relaxed, consisting of a denim jacket over a white V-neck shirt plus some slim black trousers. It was obviously not as much effort as Mahiru had gone to, but Amane was used to looking like a slob next to her, and this time he'd at least tried.

"…So I can touch your hair?"

"I don't really mind, but for today, let's make do with petting cats."

"I—I didn't mean I wanted to do it right now, you know. I can do it later, I guess…"

"I've been doing it to you, so it's only natural that you should get a chance. Fair turnabout and all."

He didn't particularly dislike it when Mahiru touched his hair… If anything, it felt really nice, and if Mahiru enjoyed it, he was happy to let her continue. Mahiru had seemed flustered at first by Amane agreeing so easily, but now she was finally wearing a happy smile.

"…Okay, then we're agreed: I'll do it later. For now, let's go pet lots of cats."

"Sure."

"Off we go, then?"

"Mm."

Thinking that setting out together from the same apartment felt a little embarrassing somehow, Amane left his place with Mahiru.

As they walked side by side, the thought occurred to Amane to extend his hand to her.

"Here, have a hand," he said lightheartedly.

Mahiru flushed faintly and smiled as she squeezed his hand.

He had done a degree of preliminary investigation, but when they actually entered the cat café, it was much more spacious than Amane had imagined.

After the two had signed in and used hand sanitizer, they stepped into the main café area. As expected, they could see cats everywhere, walking around or curled into balls or playing with other patrons.

"Wow… It's pretty big. And clean."

The café offered food and drinks, so perhaps it was to be expected, but the cleanliness of the place still surprised him. He could barely smell any of the scents characteristic of many places where animals made their home. In fact, it was nearly odorless.

He had looked at the reviews online, and this seemed to be a cat café that was prized for its hygiene and took good care of its cats. It was a popular place, but to keep the cats from getting stressed, it had only a few seats. There were also many hideouts for the cats, and in the end, the café seemed to be set up less for touching the cats than for sharing the space with them.

This café had a time-limit system, and the fees were high, but it was such a beautiful and calm space that he didn't mind paying at all.

"Whoa…cats… Look, Amane-kun, they're all so cute!"

There were cats with the other customers, so Mahiru spoke in a quiet voice, but he could hear her eager excitement as she tugged on his sleeve. There were all sorts of cats around, and Mahiru's eyes sparkled as she looked at them eagerly.

The topic of animals had never really come up, but apparently she really liked cats. She was so excited, Amane could feel his mouth curling into a smile.

"You're right; they're really cute."

"So cute!" Mahiru didn't seem to realize how cute she was being herself as she looked at the profile chart she had received from the receptionist, listing the cats' names and breeds along with photos. She pointed to the Siamese cat beside her. "Ah, that one's name is Silky!"

Only the fur on its tail and around its face was black, while the rest of the coat on its long, slender body was a dazzling white. It had characteristic blue eyes and exuded an air of nobility.

Mahiru was itching to pet it, but suddenly touching the cats was prohibited, so she kept an eye on it from the side as she slowly brought her fingers closer to its nose and let it sniff her.

The cat's nose twitched.

She didn't say it out loud, but Mahiru clearly thought even that was cute, so she definitely seemed to like cats a lot.

But after getting a full sniff of Mahiru's scent, Silky abruptly and gracefully dashed away.

Mahiru was clearly disheartened.

"That doesn't necessarily mean she hates you; I think she was just done saying hello."

"R-right, I suppose that's fair…"

"Come on, I think we should let the cats take their time and get used to us. Let's go have a seat for now, okay?"

Mahiru stood back up, he took her hand, and they sat down on an open sofa. Once there, Amane finally took a slow look around the whole room and saw that there certainly were a lot of types of cats.

The cat from a moment ago had been a Siamese, but there were American shorthairs, Russian blues, Munchkins, Bengals, and even more exotic breeds—cats with great individuality here, there, and everywhere.

At the next seat over, a short distance from them, an American shorthair was curled up on the table, and the girl sitting there was gently stroking it.

"So cute…"

Mahiru was looking at the other customers without bothering to disguise the envy in her eyes. Amane smiled wryly and looked over the menu.

The food and drink offerings at this café were supposed to be delicious.

The top recommendation seemed to be a latte with a cat design on top, formed out of the milk foam. Apparently, the staff was talented at making latte art, and many people had uploaded pictures.

Amane left Mahiru to her own devices for a moment, as she was staring at a cat loitering nearby, and he called the waiter over and ordered the signature latte art.

"I went ahead and ordered you the same thing as me, is that all right?" he asked when he had finished.

"Huh? Ah yes, that's fine."

As expected, Mahiru was so preoccupied with the cats that she hadn't even noticed him ordering. Mahiru was the type who could drink coffee or tea, so since this was a special outing, he decided to keep the order a secret and give her a little surprise.

After a short while, their order was brought over. Slowly, so as not to destroy the latte art, their smiling waiter set the cups down on the table, bowed, and left. Mahiru couldn't take her eyes off the latte art atop her cup.

"Is this okay?"

"Y-yes, it's super cute…"

"I'm glad."

On Mahiru's drink, the milk foam had been poured with great care to form a cat that was curled up asleep, its coat pattern and expression drawn with cocoa powder. In Amane's cup, they had drawn a cat leaning against the rim. The cute, dainty depictions of the cats made it easy to understand why the café had become so popular.

Perhaps to preserve the excitement, Mahiru was taking photos with her smartphone and looking quite pleased, but then for some reason her expression turned. "It's so cute I can't drink it…," she muttered.

She sounded so serious. Amane couldn't help but laugh.

"D-don't laugh at me, please."

"It's just—you're so troubled over something so adorable."

"B-but…it would be such a waste to destroy it when there's such a cute little cat…"

"But it would be even more of a waste not to drink it."

"Oh no."

It wasn't that he didn't understand Mahiru's feelings, but the foam would collapse anyway even if she left it alone, and he presumed that the person who made the coffee would probably be happier if she drank it before it got cold.

After sufficiently appreciating his own latte cat, Amane raised his cup without hesitation. He almost laughed again when he heard a murmur of sadness from beside him, but somehow he contained it enough to slowly sip his caffe latte.

Mahiru looked so downhearted that he tried his best to drink without disturbing the cat too much. The latte itself was delicious. The combination of the deep coffee flavor and the rich milk was just perfect. And it wasn't too sweet, so Amane, who drank his coffee black, didn't mind it.

"Mm, it's good."

When he took a break from drinking and made this comment, Mahiru groaned slightly but brought her cup to her lips with some hesitation.

She looked funny and cute drinking her latte and carefully trying to *not* destroy the cat, and Amane's lips must have curled into an unintentional smile.

"I—I feel like you're laughing at me, but—"

"You're imagining things. Is it good?"

"Yes, it is, of course."

When Amane looked at Mahiru once she had pulled her mouth away from the cup and set it back down, he couldn't control himself, and his shoulders shook with laughter.

"Wh-why are you laughing?"

"Well, you have a white mustache."

She must have failed to pay attention to the rest of the milk foam in her efforts to keep the cat intact, for Mahiru's upper lip was now decorated with a white mustache reminiscent of Santa Claus.

She looked so extremely cute that he instinctively snapped a photo with his phone.

"Uh, d-did you just take a picture?!"

"Sorry. Do you want me to delete it?"

"W-were you planning on keeping a record of such a shameful face?"

"You looked cute, so I just took it."

When he said that, Mahiru pressed her lips together tightly, and her face flushed red. In a quiet voice, she grumbled, "…You can have the one photo."

She was still wearing the white mustache as she told him that, so Amane felt his chest growing warm as he held back a laugh and nodded in agreement.

"…Ah!"

Around the time they finished drinking their caffe lattes decorated with foam art, one of the cats jumped up on Amane's lap.

It was the American shorthair that had been at the neighboring seat earlier.

After checking out the profile sheet, they saw that it said CACAO, FEMALE.

Amane wasn't sure whether she was friendly or just shameless, but she had suddenly gotten up on his lap, which he found perplexing. He was fully aware that cats did as they pleased, but he was slightly unsettled to be approached so suddenly.

The warmth in his lap was more profound than he had expected, as the cat confidently curled up and settled in as if to say this was her spot.

"This one is really friendly."

He looked over at Mahiru as the cat sniffed at his fingers and thought she seemed incredibly jealous.

Once Cacao had finished sniffing to her heart's content, she nuzzled her face into Amane's palm, so he figured she was asking him to pet her and started scratching her under her chin like he had practiced on Mahiru.

He could tell from the vibration and the sound that she was purring.

Feeling relaxed by the presence of the cute cat, Amane ruffled the fur under her chin as he petted her, but he felt jealous eyes on him from Mahiru sitting next to him and chuckled to himself again.

"Mahiru, put out your hand."

"Huh? R-right."

She obediently stretched out her hand, so Amane removed his own hand from Cacao and, in its place, put Mahiru's palm near Cacao's face.

This cat is probably friendly and used to humans, so she ought to allow herself to be petted after a proper greeting.

Cacao sniffed at Mahiru's hand, then let out a somewhat listless *meeeow* and rubbed her face against Mahiru's palm. Mahiru's eyes sparkled, overcome with emotion.

“Amane-kun, she let me pet her!”

Mahiru smiled gleefully at Amane as she finally got to pet a cat, stroking the fur in the right direction.

Perhaps a sign of how carefully the cats were looked after, Cacao’s fur was shiny and incredibly soft. She didn’t smell bad, either, and had just a faint hint of cat odor. She was obviously treasured dearly by the staff.

All the cats had nice coats and looked healthy, and there weren’t any that were extremely fat or too thin. And all the lively cats were free to move about as they pleased.

“…So cute.”

“They really are, aren’t they? …I’m jealous of you, Amane-kun…”

“How about you call Cacao over to you? Tell her to come sit in your lap.”

The cats couldn’t understand words, but gestures seemed to communicate surprisingly well.

As a test, Mahiru patted her lap and called “Come here,” and Cacao meowed once, then slowly moved over to sit on the offered spot.

Mahiru’s expression of excitement at that moment was so full of joy that just seeing it was enough to make Amane happy, too.

“Look, she sat on me!”

“That’s great. Hey, she wants you to pet her.”

Cacao must have preferred Mahiru’s soft lap over Amane’s hard one, for she meowed even louder than before and pushed her face into Mahiru’s palm.

Smiling at the beaming Mahiru, who was rubbing the cat to her heart’s content, Amane captured the moment with his smartphone.

“Is this photo all right?”

“…This one’s okay,” Mahiru said as she stroked Cacao.

Amane kept smiling at her and stood up.

Along the wall were bookshelves filled with magazines and comics, so he intended to bring several of them back to the table.

This place was called a cat café, but that didn’t mean one would constantly be playing with cats. His main goal was to spend a comfortable time in a space where there were cats around, so relaxing with some reading material was also an option.

While Mahiru was absorbed in petting Cacao, Amane chose something to read from the shelves without much thought. That was when he noticed that Silky, the cat that had greeted Mahiru when they first came in, was at his feet.

He crouched down and put his index finger near her nose, and as expected, she sniffed him in greeting.

This gesture was quite adorable, so his cheeks softened into another smile as he watched her fondly. When she was done smelling him, Silky lifted a front paw and leaned against him, as if she was going to leap into his arms.

Silky meowed in a higher pitch than Cacao and touched him again, so Amane sat cross-legged on the floor.

The cat had a high-class aura but seemed to be comfortable around people, and she was allowing him to pet her. When he tried stroking her, she put on a very satisfied expression.

She was purring and nuzzling him, so he took that as a sign that she wanted him to pet her more. In accordance with the wishes of the noble Lady Silky, he gently and carefully stroked her back.

There was a cat at Itsuki's house, so he understood how to do the petting. He watched Silky carefully and adjusted his motions to keep her happy and docile.

So cute…

He could feel her purring, and another gentle smile soon slipped onto his lips. At first, she had behaved a bit coldly, so he hadn't expected her to be so permissive and fawning.

Now that I think about it, she's kind of like Mahiru.

Mahiru had also been cold and standoffish at first, but once she let her guard down, she started gazing at him with trust in her eyes, fawning over him, and getting comfortable. In that way, she had reminded him of a cat.

Inwardly bestowing Silky with the moniker Angel Two, Amane enjoyed petting her. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a camera shutter. He looked up and saw that Mahiru had approached without him noticing and taken a picture with her smartphone.

"I thought you were taking a while… So you made friends with Silky, huh?"

"I don't know why, but she came over to see me."

"You're so stingy… I want to pet her, too…"

"What happened to Cacao?"

"Cats have a mind of their own…"

Apparently, the cat had gone off somewhere.

He looked around the café and saw Cacao curled up on the second story of a cat tower. Just a moment ago, she had been sitting with Mahiru, but she must have changed her mind.

"Is Silky your favorite, Amane-kun?"

“Well, I haven’t petted all of them yet to really start comparing… But yeah, she kind of resembles you, so I’d like to keep petting her.”

“Resembles me?”

“I mean, you were pretty standoffish at first, kind of cold and blunt, but once you decided you liked me, you warmed up quickly.”

Sure, it was catlike for her to let her guard down and fawn on him, but he thought that the way she trusted him and relished his attention was more doglike, so he thought of her as a cross between a cat and dog.

Mahiru didn’t seem to realize just how badly she was spoiling him, which made Amane feel happy yet embarrassed at the same time.

“…I am not a cat. Besides, it’s not like I get attached to just anyone.”

“Well, that’s because you’re very wary.”

“…You haven’t been thinking of me as a cat?”

“I haven’t, I haven’t,” he answered, stroking the cat in his lap the same way he always patted Mahiru. “Right?” he sought Silky’s agreement.

Either she was good at reading the room, or it was just a coincidence, but Silky meowed, right on cue so even Mahiru couldn’t press the matter any further.

But Mahiru looked at him with a fairly dissatisfied expression, so Amane used his unoccupied left hand to stroke Mahiru’s head.

“…So you do think of me as a cat.”

“Sort of. Here, how about you play with Silky? It looks like they’ll lend you some toys if you go to the front desk.”

“You’re not getting out of this that easily.”

“…So you don’t want to play with her, then?” he asked as he teased the cat.

Mahiru pouted slightly and grumbled “You don’t play fair, Amane-kun,” then headed for the front desk to borrow some cat toys.

Amane had been planning to switch places with her and go to the desk himself, so he watched her with wide eyes, then tilted his head in confusion as he recalled Mahiru’s expression, which had been a little sulky for some reason.

“What does that mean, I don’t play fair? …Is she talking about playing with Silky?” He muttered as he pondered the reason for Mahiru’s sour expression, but the cat just meowed as if to say “How should I know?” and nestled its head in his palm again.

Ultimately, the reason for Mahiru’s pouting wasn’t really clear, but as she played with the cats, her mood quickly improved, and she was soon smiling at him again.

After a certain point, Mahiru stopped paying attention to Amane and focused entirely on the cats. He smiled wryly as he watched her play, but for some reason, the cats kept settling into Amane’s lap.

Mahiru saw this and started sulking again, but Silky, as if to say "There's no helping it," moved over to sit on Mahiru's thighs, and all was well again.

There must have been something about Amane that the cats appreciated, because as he was petting them, even though he had no treats to give, other cats continued to swarm around him.

Eventually, though, they reached the end of their allotted time in the café. The two of them used lint rollers to remove cat hair from their clothes and washed their hands, and as Amane finished, Mahiru went to get the bill, then looked at him with dissatisfaction.

"Why are you making that face?" he asked.

"You didn't have to go to the trouble of doing that."

"It's no trouble. It's for my own satisfaction, so don't worry about it." Amane had gone ahead and paid for everything already, so she didn't have to. "Actually, think of it as my way of saying thanks for coming with me to a cat café, a place I never would have gone into alone. Okay?"

"…But—"

"Let me treat you in situations like this. If you don't agree, then… All right, how about coming with me again to make it even?"

"…I can't do anything but agree to that, can I?"

"Well, I'm for this plan, too, so it's a win-win. No problem!"

Mahiru pressed her lips together tightly and nudged Amane's upper arm, then squeezed Amane's hand again.

Amane and Mahiru had lunch at a restaurant they had picked out in advance, one with a good reputation, before heading to the shopping mall. It was a popular restaurant, and as expected, the food was tasty, just like the reviews reported. Perhaps it was a simple matter of opinion, but Amane still thought Mahiru's cooking edged out ahead, confirming once more that hers was the very best.

Seeing as how it was Golden Week, there were quite a few more customers in the mall than there might have been on a typical weekday, so gripping tightly onto Mahiru's hand, Amane stopped beside a wall so they could figure out where they wanted to go before diving into the crowds.

"So then, what will we do in the mall? You mentioned shopping, but is there something in particular you want to buy?"

"N-nothing specific, but um, I thought it sounded fun to have a look around together… I-is that all right?"

"Yeah, that's fine. I'm good with window-shopping."

At home, he had often been dragged around by his mother, and his family would also sometimes go out shopping, so he had built up a tolerance to an activity that some found fairly agonizing.

Besides, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get a look at some things that Mahiru wanted to see.

"Where do you want to start? There are all sorts of shops—variety goods, clothes, interior decorating…"

This enormous shopping complex had an almost uncountable number of clothing and accessory stores, restaurants, variety shops, and entertainment facilities all crammed in wall-to-wall; so many stores over such a wide area that they couldn't possibly see it all in one day. Since it would be impossible to look around the entire mall, he had to get her to provide at least some direction.

"All right… Can we start with clothes?"

"Sure. You buying a new outfit?"

"I want to buy something, if there's anything good. They've got this summer's styles out, so I'd like to get some new clothes."

"Summer, huh…? That came quickly."

The sweaty season was about to start, but even so, it was still the time of year when the sunlight was warm and cheerful, so he thought it was a bit hasty to switch over to summer clothes just yet. The stores, of course, had to anticipate the approaching season, but still, Amane couldn't shake the springtime feeling.

"This summer… Uh, you'll be coming home with me…won't you?"

"Ah y-yes. If it's all right with you and your parents, that is." She seemed to remember the earlier conversation about coming with him to his parents' home the next time he went, and she nodded eagerly.

"I asked my mom once more after we talked, and she said you're definitely welcome. Actually, she insisted I bring you."

His parents would probably agree to let her stay even if he didn't check with them first, but they would have to get a room ready and everything, so he had made sure to ask ahead, and they'd promised to give her a warm welcome.

He was certain to hear complaints from his mother if he showed up without her, so he was grateful for Mahiru's enthusiasm.

"Well, my hometown's not that impressive, you know. Although, I guess there's plenty to do."

"Really?"

“Well, my mother never had trouble finding a new place to drag me. There’s a shopping mall like this one, a ridiculously huge wilderness park, a stupidly large water park, just general stuff like that.”

Amane’s hometown was in a nice, central location, not too urban and not too rural, so it was a place where people wouldn’t get bored in the summer or winter. Far from it, there were so many things to do that it was a distinct danger to be dragged around from place to place and not have any time to be alone.

The water park would be open in the summer, so it would feel really nice to go on the slides and swim around and relax. There was also a large water park in the area where they were living now, so they could probably also go swim there right after the start of summer vacation.

Amane wasn’t especially good at sports, but he didn’t have anything against being active. He liked to swim, so it would probably be nice to go by himself, too. There was no way that he could tell Mahiru he’d like to go to the pool with her, because the invitation would sound too much like he had an obvious ulterior motive.

“Swimming is optional at our school, so if you don’t take it, you don’t get the chance to swim, so it might be nice to go swimming. If you want to, you could go with my mom… Mahiru?”

“Uh, no, it’s nothing…”

“Ah, don’t worry. I’m not thinking that I want to see you in a swimsuit or anything rude like that.”

“I d-didn’t think you were. A p-pool, huh?”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

Amane always thought of swimming pools in the summertime, and not in a weird way or anything, but Mahiru shook her head with slightly stiff movements.

“W-well…umm…”

“Hmm?”

“A-as long as I don’t have to swim, um…I could consider going…”

“…Is it possible that you don’t know how to swim?”

She blatantly refused to meet his eyes. Apparently, he had been right on the money.

“…I honestly thought you could do literally anything.”

“O-of course I can’t do everything. Swimming is optional, so I thought I could get by without telling anyone.”

Her face was turning redder by the second. She was obviously embarrassed.

“I don’t know what to say; I didn’t expect that…”

“Th-that’s enough about swimming already, isn’t it? Come on, let’s go.”

Mahiru didn't seem to want him to dwell on the fact that she couldn't swim, and with a very red face, she tugged at his hand. Well, not exactly tugged—she pressed her body against his arm and squeezed it tightly. It was clear she was trying to push him to get started with their window-shopping because she wanted to avoid the topic, but she couldn't find any traction.

All the fabric on the clothes in the shops was more lightweight, to match the changing seasons as the weather gradually got warmer. The chiffon blouse Mahiru had on that day, for example, was very light and thin, and it had a wide collar, exposing much of her neck and shoulders. And Amane discovered at this moment that he was at just the right angle to see directly down the front of her undershirt.

But he had a feeling that if he pointed that out right now, she would run away in a huff, so instead he kept his mouth shut and gently extracted his arm from Mahiru's grasp, then firmly took her by the hand.

Frankly, he wouldn't have minded being able to enjoy the view for a little while longer, but his feelings of guilt took over and internally he derided himself for being a spineless loser.

"I hear you, I hear you. Don't run; you'll fall."

"…I'm not a child."

Mahiru thankfully turned away, apparently unaware of Amane's agitation, and Amane, too, turned to look outside, hoping to escape her gaze for a bit.

Desperately trying to drive the lingering feeling of that softness pressing up against his arm out of his mind, Amane sighed quietly enough that Mahiru couldn't hear.

Amane gazed down the long row of shops as Mahiru tugged him along by the hand, but once again, all he could think about was how much attention she attracted.

She possessed a simple and clean beauty that befitted her nickname of "the angel." But right now, Mahiru was exuding an aura of carefree joy that made him want to wrap his arms around her.

In angel mode, Mahiru had the beauty and ephemerality of a painting and made onlookers feel like she must not be touched or interfered with. However, that was a fragile, artificial kind of beauty, and Amane knew it wasn't who she really was. The girl holding his hand was wearing a genuine, carefree smile and brimming with life. Without her even saying a word, he could tell from her expression and the way she held his hand, and even the way she walked, that she was having a lot of fun.

Her usual restrained smile was beautiful, too, but he thought she looked much cuter when she let her feelings show on her face and smiled with her whole being, rather than keeping it all bottled up.

"…Is something the matter?" she suddenly asked.

"No," he answered. "I was just thinking that we get a lot of stares when we're walking together."

Both men and women were turning to look at them as they passed, which really drove home the reality of Mahiru's beauty.

"…I don't think I'm the only one they're looking at, you know?"

"Well, I'm sure some of them are taking the time to size up the guy escorting you."

"That's not what I mean, geez!"

She looked up at him with disappointment but didn't seem inclined to elaborate, only squeezing his hand tightly again. He heard her mumble quietly, "His self-esteem is a real problem…"

But Amane knew that if he was with Mahiru, he would be under strict scrutiny, and it was also obvious that he could never compare favorably to her, so this wasn't really an issue of self-esteem or anything like that, as far as he was concerned.

"All right, listen up," Mahiru said. "I'll try to say this as frankly as possible so you can understand."

"Huh? What's with that voice? Scary."

"How rude…" She pressed on his nose with her index finger and silenced him. "This is your own fault, you know?"

But instead of pouting, Mahiru wore a teasing smile as she repeatedly poked at Amane's nose, then pulled away once satisfied and tugged on Amane's hand. Actually, it would be more accurate to say she pressed up against his arm again.

"…Things would move along a lot faster if you just had a little confidence," Mahiru grumbled, putting her forehead against his upper arm.

Amane couldn't stand it. He had to look away.

…It's not on purpose; she doesn't mean it.

Amane was trying not to think about the softness pressed up against him. He tried to politely open up some distance between them, but Mahiru clutched his arm as if to tell him not to go anywhere.

He shuddered, thinking that if this was all intentional, she was acting like quite the little devil. But he was convinced she wasn't aware of what she was doing, so he shuddered for a different reason.

If things continued this way, he was going to blow his top, so Amane somehow turned his conscious mind to other things and took an easy look around at the area. Exactly when he needed it, he spotted a store lined with racks of understated clothes that Mahiru might like.

“Hey, the clothes on that mannequin seem like they would suit you. Want to go take a look?”

He pointed out the shop with his free hand, hoping to divert attention from the fire currently searing his cheeks, and Mahiru asked, “Are those the sorts of clothes you like, Amane-kun?” She seemed interested, so their feet naturally led them toward the shop. “How about this one?”

“Yeah, well, you look good in everything, but something like this does seem like it would suit you in particular.”

The mannequin was dressed in an off-the-shoulder dress with thin stripes on a white field. It was summer clothing, so the fabric was fairly thin, and the shoulders were exposed. It looked cool and comfortable for warm-weather outings.

This style of clothing looked really good on women who were slender and had pretty décolletage, so he was sure it would look great on Mahiru. He mentally dressed her in the outfit as she stood there next to the mannequin and was immediately able to imagine her looking light and breezy in it. It was a look that would go well with a straw hat.

“I’ll just go try it on, okay?”

Mahiru picked up one of the same from a rack of dresses hanging next to the mannequin, as if she had either decided quickly or had always been planning to try it on.

Amane was a bit taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm. He accepted the bag she entrusted to him, and she immediately disappeared into the fitting room.

He waited for Mahiru to change clothes, baffled by her excitement, and ended up even more baffled because for some reason he kept finding himself on the receiving end of warm looks from people nearby. It wasn’t just the store clerk—the other customers were smiling at him pleasantly, which made Amane extremely uncomfortable.

As he waited for Mahiru, he wished from the bottom of his heart that she would return soon. Finally, the fitting room curtain opened, and Mahiru stepped out.

But she hadn’t changed into the dress.

“Welcome back… You didn’t put it on?”

“No, I put it on and checked the size. But… Well, I can’t show it to you right now, because I don’t have on the right underwear…”

“S-sorry I asked.”

The chiffon blouse she was currently wearing also showed a fair amount of cleavage, but not as much as an off-the-shoulder dress. It sounded like she needed to have on different underthings than usual when wearing clothes that exposed so much shoulder, so she wasn’t ready to immediately show him the dress.

“But you were kind enough to point out that it would suit me, and I put it on and liked it, so I’m buying it.”

She took her bag back from him and went to the register with the dress in her arms, so Amane followed her in a fluster.

He started fishing his wallet out, thinking he ought to pay for it, since he was the one who said it would suit Mahiru, but she stopped him as she was already groping around in her own bag.

“You can’t pay. I need to buy this myself and show it off to you.”

“O-oh.”

“Though I won’t be able to wear it until it gets warmer. I’ll hold on to it until summer. You can look forward to seeing it.”

She looked bashful as she finished paying, and Amane shut his mouth tight and tried desperately to resist the urge to collapse on the spot.

Dammit, she’s saying such ridiculously cute things. It sounds like she’s saying she’s going to wear it just for me. My heart can’t take this.

He caught the eye of the store clerk who was taking Mahiru’s payment, and she smiled at him with a truly friendly expression, so Amane couldn’t do anything but bite his lip and avert his eyes.

Amane and Mahiru had enjoyed window-shopping together—actually, since they’d made a purchase, it was more accurate to just call it shopping at this point—but Amane had temporarily split off from Mahiru and was on his own.

That was because Mahiru had gone to buy something she wanted to check out on her own and said she needed to be alone for a bit. This outing had been Mahiru’s suggestion to begin with, and Amane figured that girls had all sorts of shopping that they wouldn’t want other people to know about, so he readily parted ways and went over to a pillar near the mall fountain they’d designated as a meeting place.

Amane was plenty used to accompanying women on marathon shopping trips thanks to his mother, and he was also accustomed to waiting for them when they dragged him around places. At the end of the day, he didn’t dislike waiting quietly by himself, so he did just that, without the slightest shred of irritation.

The staring decreased after he split off from Mahiru, which made him a little more comfortable, and this intermission was just what he needed to give his overburdened heart a brief rest.

…She’s so adorable and keeps touching me. I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on…

Mahiru was showing a side of herself she usually held back. She was joyful and genuine and unspeakably charming.

Mahiru must have been perfectly aware of just how extraordinary her appearance was, but she also seemed indifferent to her own beauty. Maybe it was because Amane treated her as a friend and didn't make a big deal about it, but she didn't make a fuss about her looks in front of him, and she let him see her natural cuteness, smell her sweetness, feel her softness, and so much more. Amane knew he was extremely lucky to be able to enjoy her company like that, but he felt too guilty to really appreciate it.

He was racked with shame just remembering it all, but he couldn't let it show in public, so he drew his lips in tight and quietly closed his eyes.

All these thoughts were making him restless, so he shook his head slowly to drive them from his mind.

Suddenly, Amane heard a high-pitched voice from close by. "Um, excuse me."

His eyes snapped open at the sound of an unfamiliar voice, and he looked forward to see two girls smiling at him. They were probably about college age. At least, they looked older than him. They were dressed stylishly for a Golden Week outing and smiling at Amane, who had his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Excuse me, are you alone? Do you have some free time?"

He was astonished to hear the girls ask him that.

He would have thought that, with his head hung low, it would have been obvious he didn't want to talk to anybody, so it shocked him that these girls were so bold. It was unfortunate that they seemed to have no eye for quality.

Even as suspicions flickered through Amane's mind about why these girls would have gone out of their way to come talk to him, when he wasn't even that nicely put together, he knew it would be rude to ignore them entirely, so he went ahead and looked at them with a bland expression.

"No, I'm waiting for someone."

He was hoping they would infer the situation from all the women-oriented brands emblazoned on the many shopping bags Mahiru had left with him, but the girls didn't seem to notice. Perhaps the bags didn't stand out because of their simple designs.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I've got a previous engagement, so—"

"In that case, your friend can come with us, too! We'll get tea or something."

They seemed to have decided that the friend he was waiting for was another guy.

If he and Mahiru had been dating, he could tell them he was waiting for his girlfriend and easily turn them away with that one word, but he and Mahiru weren't actually dating, and she wasn't here with him at the moment, so if he claimed she was his

girlfriend, he didn't know whether she would quickly back him up when she actually did reappear.

Besides, he had once used that excuse to get her away from a drunk guy, and Mahiru had told him to stop saying it, so he hesitated to use it again on his own.

He frowned slightly as he regarded the two girls, figuring he was probably stuck talking to them until he reunited with Mahiru—then, out of the corner of his eye, he spied some familiar flaxen hair.

"Sorry for making you wait."

Several seconds later, swinging her hair gently to the side and approaching with easy movements, his savior, the angel, appeared.

She seemed to have seen that Amane was in trouble and had come quickly. Her breathing was a little too fast for having just walked.

Mahiru smiled lightly at Amane, who had been trying to weather the waves of the girls' chatter with a stoic face, and practically leaped into his arms.

By some stroke of luck, he managed to not let it show on his face, but Amane was startled beyond belief. Mahiru was looking up at him with her body angled just right so he couldn't see the girls behind her. He could sense amazement and dissatisfaction in her eyes and the unspoken question of "*What are you doing?*" all of which he recognized as a performance to help Amane extract himself from the situation.

…She's making me super nervous; I wish she'd stop.

This was all Amane's fault—he didn't want to hurt their feelings, but his indecision had been mistaken for an invitation to keep chatting him up. And Mahiru had arrived to rescue him, so he definitely couldn't complain about her methods. But he couldn't deny it was still stressing him out.

Amane joined the charade by gently placing his hand on her back. It was a very intimate move to show they had a special relationship.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "These nice girls were kind enough to keep me company, so it didn't feel like that long."

"Oh really? Thank you for going to the trouble."

Mahiru half turned around with a beaming smile, and the girls looked at her in blank amazement. The boy they had been trying to pick up was embracing a girl who seemed like his girlfriend. On top of that, she was incredibly cute.

Mahiru must have realized why the girls were frozen in place, but her expression was full of good will, as if she had no idea. Amane was awestruck by her apparent magnanimity. She really did appear grateful, and her smile was the picture of innocence.

But the girls just stared at them, without moving an inch. Amane smiled back, trying his best to act casual. “I’m sorry. Like I said before, I have a prior engagement, so…”

Amane was relieved he’d given them that excuse earlier. He tapped on Mahiru’s back impatiently, and Mahiru, who was still wearing a divine smile, entwined her arm with his, seemingly in good spirits.

She was nestled very close to him again, and the breathless feeling in his chest returned, but he knew he couldn’t allow himself to get flustered now. Not after Mahiru had gone to the trouble of putting on this act for him. So he feigned calm and bowed to the girls.

Mahiru followed his lead and bowed, too, then at her urging, they turned and walked away from the girls.

Once they had turned a corner and checked to make sure they couldn’t be seen, Amane looked at Mahiru and saw her fake smile disappear.

“What were you doing?” she asked in a tone of voice that was suddenly flat and detached as she looked up at him.

Without meaning to, Amane chuckled at the suddenness of her transformation. She was still clinging tightly to him, but her expression looked weary and slightly displeased. She had seemed to be in a good mood earlier, but that had evidently been part of the act, for now shades of ill humor were flashing across her eyes.

“You really saved me back there,” Amane said.

“I take my eyes off you for one second… Really, I was only gone for a short while. Unbelievable. I wouldn’t have left you alone if I knew this would happen…” Mahiru was muttering to herself.

With a sudden rush of guilt, Amane noticed his gaze had drifted lower and lower over Mahiru’s body. He seemed to be the only one who was agitated by the close contact—Mahiru didn’t seem to be paying it any mind.

“You really don’t know how to tell a stranger off, do you, Amane-kun?” Mahiru didn’t show any sign of being aware of Amane’s internal turmoil. She just looked exasperated.

“Maybe I can’t turn them down, or maybe I just don’t know how to handle that type of stranger. They were girls, so I didn’t want to act rough or use strong language. I wouldn’t know what to do if I made them cry or something.”

“Honestly, I don’t know whether you’re gentlemanly or a total loser.”

“Hey, shut up, that was the first time something like that has ever happened to me, so I couldn’t help it. I never would’ve imagined in a million years that girls would come over and talk to me.”

Amane never would have thought, with so many people hanging around, that someone would talk to him of all people.

"Assertive girls are incredible, huh? They even approach antisocial guys like me."

"…The way you look now isn't really antisocial… If anything, you look more like a fresh, friendly young man."

"Those are very nice words that don't describe me at all."

"Well, a makeover can only go so far…"

"How nice of you to say."

Mahiru was right—even if he looked a little nicer on the outside, there could be no mistake that inside he was as gloomy as ever. Amane laughed despite himself.

This straightforward way of speaking was also one of the things he appreciated about Mahiru. He found it very endearing. It was far preferable to being lied to.

He knew she definitely was not intending to disparage him, so he accepted her words with a gentle understanding.

But Mahiru sighed for some reason. "Okay, I suppose I have to just tell you outright. You're definitely not bright or cheerful, but I wouldn't say you're gloomy, either. To me, you seem calm and composed, and when I'm with you, I feel calm, too. Like I can relax. Even if we're not talking, I feel comfortable when I'm by your side, and I think that's wonderful."

"…Oh, you do?"

Her compliments were embarrassing, and Amane could only manage a short reply. Mahiru didn't seem satisfied, though. She pressed against his arm again, seemingly unaware of how weak it made him.

"And how do you feel when you're with me?"

"…At home, I feel calm."

"And now?"

"…Now I can't relax at all. Because someone keeps pressing her chest up against me."

That must have been completely unexpected, and she must have been completely unaware of what she was doing, because Mahiru froze stiff and looked down at her own chest.

And then her face turned red with such force she looked like a boiling kettle.

"I thought you were doing it on purpose."

When he joked that she had been causing him terrible distress, to the point it bordered on harassment, she glared up at him with slightly teary eyes. It didn't have the slightest impact, probably because he knew she was doing it to hide her embarrassment.

"Wha—? Y-you dummy, I would never!"

“I know that. I was joking, sorry.”

He knew that if he teased her too much she would start sulking, so he apologized quickly to defuse the bomb. Mahiru’s raging emotions now extinguished, she grumbled only a small complaint. But she didn’t really have anything more to say and instead settled on punching him once in the side to vent her anger.

Smiling at her obvious frustration, Amane took hold of her hand again to make sure there was some space between them.

“Don’t cling to me so closely.”

“…Can we still hold hands?”

“I’ll lose you if we don’t.”

If they let go of each other and got lost in the Golden Week crowds, it would defeat the purpose of going out together in the first place.

“…What would you do if you lost me?”

“I would use my phone to contact you and pick a place to meet up, like normal.”

“How pragmatic.”

“Guess so. Well, I’ll try not to let you go.”

If he let her slip from his grasp and made her wander around by herself, Mahiru was far more likely to get hit on, so he didn’t intend to let her look like she was alone.

Mahiru had specifically requested this outing and probably wanted to enjoy a pleasant day rather than being hounded by people she had no interest in. Besides, even though Amane knew Mahiru was often approached by other guys, he didn’t have to like it.

At Amane’s words, Mahiru stared deeply into his eyes, then lowered her gaze to their joined hands. And then her lips curved softly into a smile, and in a voice as gentle as a blooming flower, she said, “…Yes. Please don’t let me go.”

She whispered quietly and entwined her fingers with his. Trying not to let her sense his sudden panic, Amane responded in kind.

“…So this is a game center…”

After they finished at the clothing stores and variety shops and had made a few purchases, Amane led Mahiru to his favorite arcade.

Coming here had been her idea. They had put this place last on their list of destinations; so even if they won prizes at the crane games, they wouldn’t have to carry them around everywhere. After this, they were going straight home, so they had plenty of time. Finishing the day here had undoubtedly been the right call.

Apparently, Mahiru had never come here with Chitose, either, and she looked adorable, marveling at everything around her.

“There really are all sorts of games here, huh?”

“Sure are. Not just crane games but arcade games and physical games, too. This game center has a ton of different types.”

“I can see that. And it’s super loud.”

“Ah, most places like this are.”

Mahiru was frowning a little, reminding Amane that the cacophony typical of game centers could be grating to the ears for someone not accustomed to it. He was used to this ambience, so he was fine.

The section with slots and arcade games was even louder, so he weaved his way around those areas as he walked through the game center with Mahiru following behind him.

“So what’ll you play?”

“I want to try a crane game. I want to try winning a stuffed animal.”

Her sights seemed to be set on the crane games. She looked around that section of the game center, alternately squeezing and releasing his hand in her excitement.

It was Golden Week, so the game center had gotten a lot of new prizes and had stocked plenty of cute stuffed animals that were more family-oriented, so there were plenty that Mahiru would probably like.

“…Amane-kun, I want to get that one.”

“Hmm, which one?”

“That one. That cat… Don’t you think it looks like Silky?”

The toy Mahiru was pointing at was a cat with white fur that turned dark brown around its face. With its blue eyes, it did indeed resemble Silky, the cat who had first greeted Mahiru at the cat café, and she seemed enamored by it.

“It really does look like her. You want it?”

“I do. Can I try?”

“Sure. I think the machines here are easy to win, but if you can’t get it, I’ll get it for you.”

“I’ll try my best so you don’t have to.”

Eager to take on this new challenge, Mahiru squared off against the crane game, while Amane hung back and watched. If Amane was to take a turn, he could easily secure the prize, but Mahiru wanted to win this one, and it was best to let her tackle the challenge alone.

She inserted a coin and timidly pressed the first button to move the crane arm to the side for just a moment, then checked its position. Typical of the prudent Mahiru, she seemed to be confirming how far it would move with one press of the button.

But with this type of crane game, once you let go of the button, it shifted into vertical-movement mode.

"Wait, huh? It won't move."

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. Once you let go of the button, it shifts to vertical movement, so you've only got the one chance."

"Ah, so now…"

"No matter what you do, it won't reach the stuffed animals."

The toys were placed in the middle of a wide open space, but the arm had only barely moved away from the drop chute, and all that was left to set was vertical movement. No matter how Mahiru struggled, she wouldn't be able to touch the prizes.

This game center also had the type of crane games that were timed and used a lever that could move in all directions, but this particular machine was the button type, so there was unfortunately no going back. This happened to a lot of people when they were first playing crane games, so there was really no getting around it.

"Well, that hundred yen is gone, but you still have the vertical movement, so you can use this as a chance to get a feel for the speed the arm moves and the lag after you release the button. Then you can use that information on your next try."

"Hmm… I'll do that. It's my fault for being careless," she said, then moved the arm with intense concentration, paying careful attention to the speed.

Amane felt like he hadn't given her enough warning on her first attempt, so he quietly inserted another coin, which made Mahiru look at him with dissatisfaction. Amane said "It's fine" and patted her on the back for encouragement. Reluctantly, she returned to her game.

She must have more or less figured out the speed at which the arm moved, because on her next attempt, she was able to line it up laterally with the position of the stuffed animals.

It was somewhat off-center, but she still had a chance to reach her target along the vertical axis. Even if she didn't grab right in the center of the toys, considering the arm's center of gravity and the force of its grip, plus the timing of when it released, she could still get something.

Mahiru was a total beginner, but Amane was impressed with how skillfully she was already playing. She carefully moved the arm along the vertical axis until it was more or less above the stuffed animals, then tried to pick up the stuffed cat.

Her aim was good, but the toy was slightly oblong, so when the arm squeezed, the center of gravity shifted immediately, and the cat fell.

"Hmm."

“Almost. Instead of trying to pick up the actual toy, it’ll be easier if you move it with one side of the crane arm and take advantage of its center of gravity to make it roll over.”

Luckily, the partition around the drop chute wasn’t very tall, so if she could roll the cat, it should fall down.

Mahiru blinked intently, then obediently carried out the movements as she had been told.

One thing he appreciated about Mahiru was her ability to take advice without getting angry or stubborn.

She made another attempt for the cat, taking into account the position of the arm and the stuffed animal’s center of gravity.

“So I’ll do this here…and move the head…”

Mahiru’s serious expression was reflected in the game cabinet’s glass. Amane laughed quietly so she wouldn’t hear him.

After inserting several more coins and trying for a while, Mahiru finally moved the toy into the prize chute with the crane arm.

She let out a quiet gasp as the stuffed cat fell with a plunk against the flap covering the end of the prize chute.

After a moment of silence, Mahiru looked up at Amane, slightly stunned.

“…It fell.”

“Yeah, good work… Look, it’s proof of your victory.”

Amane retrieved the stuffed animal she had fought so hard for and held it out to Mahiru. The reality that she had finally won the prize seemed to be sinking in. Right before his eyes, an expression of delight transformed her beautiful features.

“I—I got it. I got it, Amane-kun!”

“You sure did. You did great for your first time.”

He patted her head for a job well done, and she squinted in embarrassment and tightly embraced her prize, the stuffed cat that closely resembled Silky.

She seemed especially happy that she had won the toy by herself and smiled in satisfaction as she rubbed her cheek against the stuffed animal.

Amane was feeling a bit jealous of the stuffed cat as she squeezed it tightly with a cherubic smile. He was having a hard time keeping his emotions in check as he watched her celebrate.

Mahiru embraced the stuffed animal with an expression of incredible delight, but then suddenly she looked in Amane’s direction and timidly held the toy out to him.

“…Um, will you…accept this?”

“Huh, me?”

“Well, you’ve given me so many, and you seemed to really like Silky, so…”

Amane liked cats, and that cat in particular had been cute in the way she resembled Mahiru. But he couldn’t come out and say that, so he just scratched his cheek and nodded.

“…Or you’re a guy, so you don’t need stuffed animals; is that it…?”

“No, that’s not why. I was just wondering if it’s really all right for me to take it, since you worked so hard to win it.”

“I was trying to win it for you. I mean, I don’t want to sound pushy, umm… But you said it looked like Silky, so I thought maybe you liked it, so… If you don’t want it, I’ll decorate my apartment with it, but…” She looked up at him uneasily, shoulders drooping a little as if disheartened. There was no way he could turn it down now.

“All right, I’ll take it and keep it in my room. Though I, uh…I won’t put it by my pillow like you did with yours.”

“I—I wish you’d forget about that…”

“I’ll treasure the cat.”

Amane politely accepted the stuffed animal from Mahiru, grabbed a carrying bag for prizes from the dispenser nearby, and placed the cat inside.

Mahiru watched him with a happy smile, and Amane was just about to extend his hand to her again, when—

“Huh? Shiina-san?”

A voice called out to her from somewhere nearby, and Amane froze.

Mahiru stiffened, too, and they both turned awkwardly to face the direction the voice had come from. Standing there was a young man whose handsome face was both innocent and dignified… Yuuta Kadowaki.

“Kadowaki-san?”

At the sight of Yuuta, Mahiru immediately put on her angelic smiling face that she displayed at school. But it seemed a little stiffer than usual, probably because she was still struggling to regain her composure.

It was Golden Week, so they were well aware there was a good possibility of running into their classmates, but they had never expected to meet someone they had recently started hanging out with.

“It’s surprising to see you in a game center… Uh, did I interrupt something, perhaps?”

Yuuta noticed Amane and looked worried. He didn’t seem to have recognized yet that it was Amane, but as soon as Amane spoke, he was sure to be found out. On the other hand, Yuuta’s attention was focused on Mahiru, so there was a chance that Amane could escape notice.

“No, not at all…,” Mahiru said.

“This is the first I’ve heard about you having a boyfriend, you know.”

“He’s not my boyfriend; we don’t have that kind of relationship.”

Amane felt a twinge of heartache at Mahiru’s flat denial, but it was true that they weren’t dating, so he really didn’t have any right to complain. It would have been stranger if she’d said otherwise.

“W-well, to all appearances… Hmm?”

Yuuta, obviously bewildered by Mahiru’s stubborn demeanor, was about to question her again, when he suddenly focused his attention on Amane.

Their eyes met, and Amane’s cheek twitched.

Yuuta stared hard, as if puzzling over what he saw. This was an extremely bad situation for Amane.

“…Fujimiya?”

Just as Amane expected, Yuuta recognized him.

They hadn’t been hanging out for that long yet, but even so, it was clear that Yuuta was perceptive. No matter how differently Amane dressed or styled his hair, he couldn’t deceive his new friend.

Amane had hoped that maybe Yuuta wouldn’t look at a stranger so closely, and he did look pretty different today, but Yuuta didn’t miss the connection.

“Huh, Fujimiya… It’s you, right? I can tell now that I see you up close… Could it be, you two knew each other long ago and met again at school?”

“No, well…”

Yuuta seemed to take it as confirmation when he saw Mahiru hesitating to answer. He looked back and forth between Mahiru and Amane, appearing downright astonished.

Before he’d started hanging out with Yuuta, Amane might have denied everything, but now that wasn’t even remotely possible. He sighed heavily and pressed on his forehead, then looked up at Yuuta, who was wearing an inquisitive expression.

“…I’m impressed that you recognized me.”

“I knew it! Well, somehow I just knew it was you, Fujimiya.”

“Is it that easy to tell?”

“Nah, I don’t think anyone in our class would figure you out that quickly. You don’t make that sort of face very often.”

Amane wasn’t sure what “that sort of face” meant, but for the time being, Yuuta didn’t seem to have made the connection between Amane and the “mystery man” Mahiru had been spotted with, so he was relieved.

“Anyway, it’s really something else to run into the both of you, together like this.”

"…There's no point in hiding it, so I'll just tell you. It's like you said, we have indeed known each other since before we started second year. I'll even admit to being good friends. But we really don't have the kind of relationship that you're imagining, Kadowaki."

"…Oh really?"

"Really."

Mahiru had not hesitated to deny that there was something going on, so even though it made him sad to say it, Amane was also clear in his denial. It would cause trouble for Mahiru if the misunderstanding went any further or became more complicated. The one who found them just happened to be Yuuta, so he wasn't all that worried, but there would be trouble if others became suspicious—and their secret got out. He absolutely had to forbid Yuuta to speak of it.

Amane adopted a firm stance, and Mahiru grasped his sleeve and looked up at him. She seemed to have something to say but didn't make any move to open her mouth, so for the time being, he didn't press her.

Yuuta watched Amane's and Mahiru's behavior, and whether he understood or didn't, he shrugged slightly.

"Hmm… Well, that's all fine and good. I have to say, it's just like Itsuki said."

"What did he say?"

Amane's eyes narrowed involuntarily when he thought about Itsuki having some slip of the tongue.

"Nothing you need to worry about." Yuuta laughed. "But he said you look cool when you get dressed up properly. I was just thinking you do look really sharp."

"That sounds sarcastic coming from you, Kadowaki."

Amane could do nothing but smile bitterly at the compliment from the top heartthrob in their year, maybe in the whole school.

Yuuta was the type of guy who didn't have to try to be attractive. Guys like Amane, who had to spend time getting dressed up just to look decent, were always destined to be jealous of guys like him. Amane didn't go so far as to begrudge the other boy his good looks, but he did on occasion imagine having a more lustrous life if he'd only had the good fortune to be born like that.

"I wasn't trying to be sarcastic. Just saying, you should style yourself like this all the time."

"No way; it would be a pain to set my hair every morning. And it would stand out if I suddenly showed up at school looking like this."

"Well, that is true, but… Shiina-san, you must have known that Fujimiya could look like this?"

“That’s, well… Yes.”

Mahiru nodded uncomfortably as Yuuta turned to study her.

It wasn’t a look of scrutiny or distrust. More like he was searching for clues.

“Mm-hmm, I think I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That you also don’t want to cause Shiina-san any trouble.”

Mahiru looked startled by his words. Yuuta laughed quietly and said, “You’re easier to read than I expected, Shiina-san.”

He gave a thin smile. It looked somewhat warm, yet lonely in a way—and perhaps even tinged with a bit of jealousy.

“Um, Kadowaki-san?” Mahiru asked hesitantly.

“Hmm?”

“Well… I’d like to ask you not to say anything about this to other people. About us being f-friends, and…everything.” Mahiru would be troubled if he said anything, so she also asked for his silence.

Yuuta nodded readily. “Ah, you don’t have to worry about that. I think I understand why you want to keep this hidden, and I appreciate how you feel. Besides, I’ve found that once rumors about you are spread around, you don’t much enjoy spreading them yourself.”

Amane had never been so grateful that Yuuta was such a person of character. Also, he imagined that their situation was probably something Yuuta could deeply relate to. He was extremely popular with the girls at school, and so he often had to deal with jealousy from members of his own sex, and on the flip side, if he ever made friends with a member of the opposite sex, that girl would be in danger. He had told Amane as much, so he was probably speaking from experience.

Even if they didn’t have a romantic relationship, if it became known that a plain guy like Amane had become friends with the graceful angel Mahiru, who turned away every suitor, there was bound to be trouble.

Amane was very grateful that Yuuta apparently understood that and would keep his peace.

“Thanks, Kadowaki.”

“Yeah, well, I think it’s the normal thing to do. And besides, I wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize our relationship, Fujimiya. Not after I finally managed to make a friend.”

Yuuta flashed one of his bright smiles at them, and looking at him, Amane keenly understood why this boy was so popular. Even speaking as another boy, Amane thought that Yuuta was a friendly, earnest guy, so he could understand how the girls might find

him utterly charming. It wasn't just because he was handsome; he was also a good person. The other guys in their class didn't stand a chance.

"Oh, that's right. Fujimiya?"

"Hmm?"

"I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

That day, which Yuuta casually mentioned in a slightly coy tone, was the day when Amane, Itsuki, and Yuuta had planned to go to karaoke together. In other words, Yuuta was telling him he would be asking for more details about this situation then.

When their eyes met, Yuuta was wearing a playful smile, underpinned by his peculiar brand of confidence.

"Got it," Amane answered, though he really felt like running away.

Mahiru watched Amane and Yuuta with a hint of jealousy.

"Sorry about that."

They had separated from Kadowaki and were on their way home, and on the walk to the apartments from the nearest train station, Amane apologized to Mahiru in a quiet voice.

Mahiru, who was quite satisfied that she had won some other small toys at the game center, blinked her caramel-colored eyes in surprise at this sudden apology.

"What are you apologizing for, all of a sudden?"

"Well…for getting found out by Kadowaki."

"Surely that was an accident. Besides, I think everything turned out all right. He seemed to be rather understanding…"

Now that she said that, he knew it was true, but even so, he was annoyed that someone suspected that they were dating.

Fortunately, Yuuta had not hung around long, probably because he could tell how uncomfortable Amane was in that situation. Still, it had tugged at Amane's heart to hear Mahiru deny everything so definitively.

"Besides, it's not like we weren't aware that something like this could happen when we decided to go out," Mahiru continued. "Considering the possibilities, I think we're lucky it was Kadowaki-san who saw us."

"You're right. For better or worse, Kadowaki knows, but at least he's being cool about it. He really is a stand-up guy."

It's a good thing he's the one we ran into.

Amane had resigned himself to being cross-examined later, but when he considered that he would no longer have to feel guilty about continuing to conceal things from Yuuta at school, it was actually probably a good thing that they were discovered.

Amane had a feeling that Yuuta had also discerned how he felt about Mahiru, but as long as he didn't tell Mahiru herself, there would be no problem on that front.

He would probably get teased a little bit at karaoke, but Yuuta and Itsuki both had some discretion in that area, so he shouldn't get it too bad.

"…Amane-kun, you have quite a high opinion of Kadowaki-san, don't you?"

"Hmm? Uh, I guess so. We've had more and more chances to talk, and I've come to realize he's popular because he's a really good guy. He's really attractive inside and out."

"And you trust him, don't you?"

"Trust him…? Well… Yeah, I think he's a stand-up guy."

Amane already knew he could be pretty picky about the people he hung out with. If he didn't like someone's personality, he would naturally keep them at arm's length. But Amane's gut told him that Yuuta was a good guy, and that was exactly why he wasn't too panicked at being found out.

"All right, well, they do say birds of a feather flock together," Mahiru mused.

"I don't know if I belong to that flock…"

"You're putting yourself down again, Amane. Kadowaki-san decided to be friends with you because he liked your personality, right? Isn't that the same thing you thought about him? And Kadowaki-san, who you think is trustworthy, recognizes something good in you, so you ought to have more confidence."

Mahiru gently poked his cheek with the tip of her finger, and Amane smiled softly at her.

Of course he couldn't grant her wish, but as someone who always thought the worst of himself, he was grateful for her reassurance.

Amane chuckled quietly at Mahiru's sudden lecture on self-confidence, but he also felt very grateful toward her.

"You're always saying nice things about me, huh, Mahiru?"

"Well, I'm only telling the truth. It's not good for you to always be so hard on yourself."

"It's a habit."

"Well, why did you develop that bad habit? It's a real pain, you know." Mahiru grumbled in open frustration.

He wasn't sure how to answer the question. Though he knew perfectly well the reason why.

The simple answer was that he was afraid of failure.

Humans are quick learners. That goes for things both good and bad. Amane didn't want to fail, and he didn't want to get his hopes up, only for others to turn on him. So in order to protect himself from disappointment, he kept his expectations low.

But he didn't know how he should tell Mahiru that. And honestly, he didn't particularly want to have to explain it.

Mahiru stared at him with clear eyes, like she could read his mind. Then just as he started feeling uncomfortable, she looked away, leaned toward him, and pressed herself against his upper arm again.

"If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to, but please just remember that I accept you, okay? It's not good to be so hard on yourself."

"…Sure."

"If I need to, I'm going to praise you until you beg me to stop."

"Whoa, scary. You say it like that, but I really do want you to stop. I can't take it anymore."

"Well then, you need to have more self-confidence."

Mahiru smiled faintly and squeezed his hand. Feeling heat gradually surging up through his chest but not wanting to destroy this pleasant moment, Amane didn't let go. He just replied with a quiet "Thanks" and kept walking down the road home.

He didn't want to let go of her hand, but he knew that they would have to let go once they reached home, so he deliberately walked a little slowly, and Mahiru matched his pace without saying another word.

Chapter 10

An Interrogation

"Now then, I would like to ask you a bit about what happened the day before yesterday."

It was two days after Amane's outing with Mahiru. The day he had plans to go sing karaoke with Itsuki and Yuuta.

As soon as they had assembled and entered their reserved room, Yuuta immediately turned to him with a smile.

Amane had prepared himself for an interrogation, but even so, he felt really awkward being asked about this again.

Itsuki seemed to have heard about the incident from Yuuta and was wearing an expression that said *Uh-oh, you got caught!* He wasn't even trying to hide his amusement.

After bringing the cup of melon soda he had gotten from the self-service drink bar to his lips and wetting his throat, Amane reluctantly began to explain.

"…It's nothing that serious. Itsuki and Chitose knew about it already. Mahiru and I live next door to each other. That was honestly a total coincidence. And well, a bunch of things happened, and we got closer, I guess."

Thanks to Chitose, there was no use in trying to conceal the fact that they were already on a first-name basis, so as he explained the situation, he used Mahiru's name like he always did at home.

"You got to know each other, and then you went out together?"

"Yeah."

They were obviously more than simple acquaintances. In the best-case scenario, they looked like friends, in the worst, lovers. But as far as Amane was concerned, for the sake of Mahiru's honor, he had to flatly deny everything.

"It's definitely not the kind of relationship you're imagining, Kadowaki," he reasserted.

"And I have a feeling it's not quite what you're describing, Fujimiya."

"Come on—"

“Their situation goes way beyond friends, I’d say,” Itsuki interjected. “Considering Shiina-san comes over to make dinner for him every day.”

Amane’s cheek twitched as he glared at his friend. “Itsuki!”

“The truth was gonna come out sooner or later, so it’s better to just hurry up and spill it all now.”

When he put it that way, Itsuki was probably right, but by suddenly providing the detail that Amane was eating Mahiru’s home cooking every day, he all but guaranteed a misunderstanding.

“…So she’s like your girlfriend?”

“Not even a little,” Amane insisted. “We both live alone, so it’s more convenient to split the food costs and make enough for two; that’s all.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely all it is…,” Itsuki said without a trace of sincerity.

Yuuta looked unimpressed. “That’s not very convincing, Fujimiya…”

“Not you too, Kadowaki…”

He and Mahiru definitely were not in love with each other, but he was having a hard time explaining that, and the way Yuuta was staring at him was making him nervous. Not that he’d been all that composed to begin with.

“Normally, a girl won’t hang around a guy she doesn’t approve of, and she definitely wouldn’t follow him into his apartment. Unless she’s the one chasing after him anyway.”

Yuuta’s addendum at the end sounded like it came from a place of experience, which reminded Amane how wary Yuuta was of girls and their intentions. But he was right, more or less, Amane realized.

Girls, and Mahiru in particular, were usually very careful and typically didn’t approach guys without reason. Amane recognized that the fact that Mahiru associated with him at all was close to miraculous. But he knew this was a special case.

Amane just couldn’t imagine she would ever like him as a guy, or anything like that. Sometimes he even thought that the reason Mahiru was so comfortable around him was because she didn’t even consider him a man.

“…Fujimiya, you’re so hard on yourself,” Yuuta said. “And you can be really stubborn.”

“What he said,” Itsuki agreed.

Itsuki and Yuuta were both looking at Amane with exasperated looks, so it was really uncomfortable.

“So when it comes down to it, do you like Shiina-san?”

Yuuta chose to thrust this outrageous question at him at the exact moment Amane took a drink of his melon soda to mask his discomfort, and he very nearly spit it back out. "…Why would you ask that, all of sudden?" he sputtered.

"Well, you're being pretty cagey, but I saw how you acted when you were out with Shiina-san, so I'm sure you must care about her, even if only a little. Plus, I could tell by the way you looked at her—and by your whole demeanor, really—that you like her."

Amane nodded meekly. "…Is there something wrong with that?"

Man, Kadowaki sure as hell pays close attention…

For some reason, Yuuta smiled wryly at him. "No, it's not bad or anything, but…mmm, it probably won't be easy, I'd imagine."

"I have no delusions about dating Mahiru."

"Yes, yes, I can see there are still some things you don't understand. Itsuki's here to give you some encouragement, too."

"You could say that," Itsuki muttered. "What I really want is to give him a strong kick in the ass."

Yuuta nodded. "I know just how you feel."

"Don't tell me *that's* where you two agree…," Amane groaned.

So now Kadowaki's ready to kick me in the butt, too?

"Look, man, the thing is: It's really frustrating to watch," Itsuki said. "We want you to push the issue a little."

"Give it a rest already!"

"Hold on; just listen for a sec, all right?" Itsuki continued. "Shiina-san lets her guard down around you. If you put a little pressure on, she'll give in for sure."

"Okay, listen, I admit, Mahiru probably likes me, but…she doesn't like me *that way*; you know what I mean?"

Itsuki made it all sound so easy, but Amane knew better.

To begin with, he was incredibly self-conscious about the very fact of his deep affection for Mahiru. He did have to admit that she seemed to care about him more than any other guy, but he didn't think her feelings were romantic. Instead, he figured it was something akin to the way you might feel about a close and trusted confidant.

"How can you say that, when you've seen the way she looks at you?"

"What would she find attractive about me?"

When Amane offered that rebuttal, Itsuki smacked him on the back as hard as he could.

"…Oww!"

“I feel bad for hitting you, but *come on*, are you kidding me? You seriously have way too little confidence! You lose your nerve or run away at the most crucial moment.”

“…Yeah well, so what? That’s just how I am. I can’t help it.”

“We’ve got to break the habit, then. You’re way too down on yourself.”

“Mahiru tells me that a lot.”

“…So it’s bothering Shiina-san as well?” Yuuta asked.

“It’s bothering all of us who have to watch him!” Itsuki clamored. “This guy is so stubborn about things like that.”

“Shut up, will you!”

Amane really hated it when people ganged up on him.

This was just the way he was, and even if he did try to change, it certainly wouldn’t be that easy. Traumatic memories didn’t just go away because he wanted them to. Not enough time had passed yet for him to try to forget and move on.

Amane was well aware of how pathetic and worthless he was, but there was nothing he could do.

“I mean, I can’t force your hand if you tell me you’ve had enough,” Itsuki said. “But if you like Shiina-san, and you want to go out with her, you need to try harder.”

“…And you think I can do that?”

“If you weren’t such a wuss…”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Come on, that’s enough,” Yuuta chided. “But I do have to say I agree with Itsuki. You should have a little more faith in yourself, Fujimiya. Really, you’d get a lot of attention at school if you dressed up like you did the other day. Maybe you should give it some practice.”

“Practice?”

“Well, you didn’t have any trouble getting dressed up for Shiina-san, and you didn’t freak out when I saw you like that, either. So maybe practice your new look on people you know, so you can get used to it. A good way to enjoy this precious break, don’t you think?”

“…Meaning what?”

“Let’s see; I’ve got some hair wax in here somewhere…”

Swiftly, Yuuta pulled some men’s grooming wax out of his bag. When their eyes met, Yuuta was grinning boldly. Typical of the class prince, it was a lovely smile, but it sent a chill down Amane’s spine. “So how about it?” he asked.

“…I’ll pass.”

“Come on now, don’t be shy.”

“Hey, uh, aren’t we at a karaoke parlor? Shouldn’t we be doing karaoke or something?”

“Oh, you’re right!” Yuuta replied. “Okay, I’m gonna sing, so I’ll entrust Amane to your capable care, Itsuki my friend.”

“Just leave it to me.”

“You’ve gotta be joking…,” Amane muttered. All he got in return was an enthusiastic grin.

“I mean, usually this isn’t the kind of thing I’d do by force, but…in your case, Amane, it’s time you got used to being the center of a little bit of attention, so I’ve got to take drastic measures!”

“Hey, you can’t… Waah!”

Itsuki grinned and brandished the comb and hair wax, and though Amane tried to back away, there wasn’t enough space for a proper retreat in the small karaoke room.

Amane was forced to endure Yuuta’s joyful singing while Itsuki meddled with his hair.

“…Welcome ho…me…?”

When Amane made it back to his apartment, Mahiru came out to greet him with a question in her voice.

She was making stewed hamburger steaks for dinner and had let herself into Amane’s apartment early to make the sauce.

She had sent him a message saying that dinner was nearly done, so he knew that she would be at his place, but when he saw Mahiru’s face again, he felt a rush of relief.

“I’m back…”

“Why do you look so worn out…?”

“…Itsuki had his way with me.”

Itsuki had never seen Amane’s “mystery man” look, so he had styled Amane’s hair in a way he thought looked cool, which of course didn’t really fit what Amane was used to.

To make matters worse, after they were done with karaoke, the other boys had dragged him to a store that carried the type of clothes that Amane wasn’t likely to have and then embarked on a hunt for something that would suit him.

He hadn’t particularly hated the experience or anything, but he was completely exhausted, having been treated like a dress-up doll by his two friends.

“Uh-huh, you had a tough time, didn’t you?”

“…They played with me like a toy…”

“You must be tired.”

Maybe because she could tell he wasn't actually upset, Mahiru let a quiet chuckle slip out as she commended him for his patience.

Feeling slightly embarrassed at being so transparent, Amane tossed the bag containing the new clothes he had purchased into his room and went to the sink to wash his hands.

Mahiru returned to the kitchen to serve dinner, so when Amane entered the living room after properly washing his hands and rinsing his mouth, she had already set the dishes of stewed hamburger steaks down on the dining table.

Amane felt bad for not helping, so as he always did, he headed for the kitchen to dish up the cooked rice.

Amane had always thought rice paired nicely with hamburger steak, and the indescribable sweet aroma of freshly cooked rice made him smile.

"Man, I'm really tired… But actually, it made me appreciate Itsuki and Kadowaki again. They're amazing."

"What do you mean?"

Once they had set out the salad and potage soup and taken their seats across the table, Mahiru tilted her head at Amane's curious grumblings.

"Well, we got hassled constantly while we were walking around. It made me realize that guys who have always been popular are a different breed of human. They're used to that treatment, and the way they go through life is just different."

When the boys had gone on their shopping tour after karaoke, for some reason, various girls who seemed to be about college age had come up to talk to them several times.

Well, Itsuki and Yuuta were both handsome guys, although in different ways, so it seemed only natural for them to catch girls' eyes. They had experienced the so-called reverse pickup.

They had declined every proposal, though. Itsuki had his true love, Chitose, and the class prince apparently hated pushy girls. He wore a sweet smile but was always on guard, and before long, their would-be dates got the message that he was turning them down. Even when he was rejecting them, Yuuta was affable and considerate, so he wouldn't hurt their feelings. And it seemed to work well for him. Amane had struggled to deal with a similar situation earlier, and he was impressed by his friend's well-practiced tact.

"…Did the girls talk to you, too, Amane-kun?"

"They did, but only because I happened to be with the guys."

If he had to guess, the girls were really only interested in his two friends and saw Amane merely as a nice bonus. After all, as he well knew, he was very bad at talking to

strangers. Once in a while, somebody would talk to him when he went out somewhere, but this time there had been two exceptionally handsome guys next to him, so no one was going to give him a second look.

Amane shrugged and grinned wryly, but for some reason, Mahiru was sticking her lip out in a little pout.

"What is it?" he asked. "You want to tell me I'm being too hard on myself?"

"Well, there's also that… But that's not it."

"What is it, then?"

"…If you don't know, then don't worry about it," Mahiru said unhelpfully, before pressing her hands together in thanks. "Let's eat."

Amane was perplexed, but he mimicked her and pressed his hands together, giving thanks for the food and for Mahiru.

It was the day after the three boys had gone to karaoke.

As usual, Mahiru had come over to Amane's apartment.

Recently, she had been spending a lot of time there when she wasn't at school. In fact, since the start of Golden Week, she had been at his place almost every day. Even if she wasn't there during the day, she would always come over to make dinner in the evening. Amane was of course quite happy to have the object of his affections close by, so he let Mahiru do whatever she liked.

Today, she was next to him playing on her phone. Fiddling with her phone was a completely normal thing to do, of course, but she was staring at the screen with a bit more enthusiasm than usual.

And while it would have been an invasion of her privacy to peek at the screen, and Amane had no intention of doing so, he couldn't help but say something, since it was so unusual for Mahiru to be absorbed in her phone like that, when she usually only used it to contact someone or look something up.

"What have you been looking at all this time?" Amane ventured, figuring that just asking wouldn't be rude.

For some reason, Mahiru jumped at his question. Then she turned to look in Amane's direction with a nervous frown. Amane was puzzled. He wasn't sure what might make her act that way.

Then Mahiru turned away from him. She only did that when she was feeling guilty about something.

"…You're hiding something," Amane insisted.

"H-hiding…? Well, promise you won't get mad?"

"Are you doing something that would make me mad?"

Amane had been told that his resting facial expression looked a bit sullen, but he very rarely got angry, and he had never before gotten truly upset with Mahiru. He didn't think she'd give him a reason to lose his temper—at worst, he could imagine getting a little annoyed.

"…Depending on how you're feeling, you might get upset."

"Hmm. Well, why don't you tell me, and we'll see?"

"…Well, your mother has been…sending me old photos of you."

"Oh, I'm sure she had plenty to share…"

He had a lot of questions for his mother about why she thought it was okay to send Mahiru photos of him out of the blue like that.

"W-well, there's a reason, you see. Your mother and I were talking, and we just happened to get on the subject of Children's Day, and… and I said 'I bet Amane-kun was really cute when he was little…' So you see…"

"Wait, let me take a look at them. She didn't send you anything really outrageous, right?"

When it came to old photos, there were sure to be some Amane had forgotten about. But he could definitely remember a few that captured embarrassing moments he would rather nobody see. His mother really ought to have let him inspect the pictures before sending any to Mahiru.

Mahiru refused to answer his question. She wouldn't even look him in the eye. From her reaction, Amane could guess that the photos were something he wouldn't like. He glowered at her but wasn't about to try to rip the smartphone out of her hands, so he decided to press her until she capitulated and confessed.

"Mahiru…would you rather cooperate and show me the photos, or am I gonna have to bug you till you do?"

With a serious look on his face, Amane sat up on one knee and put a hand on the back of the sofa behind Mahiru's head. He leaned in close to her, leaving her with little room to escape.

Mahiru's face would go pale when she saw he had cornered her…or so he thought, but instead she flushed red and squeezed her favorite cushion to her chest. She looked even more nervous than before but still wasn't talking.

Is it that bad…?

Amane had a sinking feeling. He continued staring intently into Mahiru's eyes, but he didn't get the reaction he was hoping for. Far from it, she tried to push the cushion into his face.

Amane grabbed the cushion and tossed it aside. He didn't understand why she was making such a big fuss. Mahiru must not have been holding the cushion too tightly, because he was easily able to pull it out of her hand and send it rolling across the floor.

Mahiru still hadn't budged from her spot on the sofa.

"Come on; it's time to fess up," Amane whispered as he closed in to pinch her cheek.

Without warning, Mahiru flopped down on the sofa. It happened so quickly that Amane couldn't react, and on her way down, Mahiru collided with the arm he'd been using to support himself, so he also lost his balance and tumbled down onto the sofa. Fortunately, he managed to catch himself before he crushed Mahiru, but he ended up much closer to her than he expected.

Both of them froze at this sudden proximity.

Their bodies weren't too close, but their faces were so close that their breath intertwined, and if he leaned in just a little, their noses would bump. Amane was close enough to see that the long eyelashes that rimmed Mahiru's wide, caramel-colored eyes were quivering slightly. At this distance, Mahiru's characteristic sweet scent filled his nostrils, and he didn't know what he should do.

Both of them were frozen stiff, but Mahiru was the first to move.

Her light-pink lips trembled, and she squeezed her eyes shut tightly. Her face was flushed, and she was taking shallow, timid breaths. She appeared nervous, as if she was preparing for some kind of impact, but her lips looked soft and sweet. She seemed simultaneously innocent and alluring. Mahiru practically embodied such contradictions. Amane couldn't look away.

The sight of her aroused both his desire to protect her and the urge to make her his, and in spite of his better judgment, Amane reached out his hand—

—and pinched Mahiru on the cheek.

"Wha—?"

"…That's a funny face," he muttered with a wry chuckle.

Mahiru's eyes flew open, and her expression changed in an instant. Instead of the bashfulness from before, now it was more like equal parts shame and anger. She glared at him through tear-filled eyes. "Is that what you're going to say after pinning a girl down and touching her face?"

Amane smiled again. “Okay, okay, that was my bad. I wasn’t expecting a struggle.”

“Oh, well excuse me for putting up a fight!” she replied. “It only happened because you pushed me down!”

“That was because you were hiding the photos my mom sent you behind my back.”

“Ack! …Ughhh.”

When it became clear that Mahiru wasn’t going to say anything else, Amane moved off of her, still smiling. He slipped a hand between the sofa and Mahiru’s back and helped her sit up. Mahiru moved her lips like she was mumbling something to herself and made an odd expression.

“So…,” Amane said. “Are you going to let me examine my own photographs?”

“…Knock yourself out,” she said with resignation. She still sounded annoyed, and her face was as red as ever, but she showed Amane the image list from the chat between his mother and her.

If he was to point out how badly she was blushing, she would probably rush right out of his apartment, so Amane resisted the urge to say anything else as he looked away so Mahiru couldn’t see his face.

…That was a surprise.

Amane was trying to stay calm, but even now his heart was pounding out a rhythm with explosive force.

He wasn’t sure what he might have done to Mahiru if he hadn’t stopped himself and pinched her instead. She had certainly shown no signs of stopping him.

Man, I was almost a real jerk just then…

Shame weighed heavily in his gut. Yes, it had been an accident, and maybe they were both at least a little bit to blame. But that certainly didn’t make it okay to touch Mahiru so intimately, in a manner usually reserved for lovers. That would not have been acceptable.

If he had gone ahead and kissed her, he was sure Mahiru would have burst into tears or something along those lines. It wouldn’t have been right to do something like that. He wasn’t her boyfriend or anything. And if he had done it anyway, she would have definitely cut him out of her life for good.

Amane didn’t want to be the kind of selfish person who only thought about what he wanted.

"…Amane-kun, you said you wanted to check the photos, but are you even going to look at them?" Mahiru asked. She sounded even more sullen than before, and when Amane looked in her direction, he saw that the redness in her face had finally started to abate somewhat, and she had her cheeks puffed out a bit.

"Sorry, I was busy thinking."

"Dummy."

Mahiru didn't often insult him, and she had used a word that was kind of cute, but Amane could tell from her tone that she was running out of patience, so he quickly looked down at the smartphone.

In the photo roll were pictures of Amane from preschool and elementary school. At a glance, he didn't see anything especially painful, so that was a relief, but there were images of him beaming with an innocent smile he couldn't even imagine emulating now, so he still felt awfully embarrassed.

Amane's face was turning red for a different reason at this moment, and to distract himself from the shame welling up inside, he glanced over at Mahiru. She was no longer wearing a sullen expression—instead, she was staring dreamily out into space with her hand over her mouth, looking dazed.

Sensing that he wasn't supposed to see her like that, Amane quickly lowered his eyes back to the phone.

His heart was pounding again, and he tried to focus his eyes and his mind on anything else.

Chapter 11

None but You

"…Come to think of it, Amane-kun, are you doing anything for Mother's Day?" Mahiru asked quietly, as if she had just remembered the holiday. They were watching television together, and she'd noticed a listing for a program labeled as a Mother's Day special. Amane had tried to casually change the channel, figuring that Mahiru wouldn't like being reminded of her parents, but she didn't seem particularly bothered.

He nodded, feeling a little relieved that she wasn't upset. "Well, I guess I'll send a small present and a bouquet to the house."

It was a little bit of a hassle, but she was his one and only mother, after all, and he figured as her son he ought to show his appreciation for everything she did for him. But since he was out of the house now, it wasn't like he could go say it in person.

"Well, since I'm far away, that's about all I can do. If we still lived together or close by, I would try to do a little more, but…"

"Like help with the housework?"

"Honestly, if I try to help, I just end up making more work for her."

Thanks to Mahiru, Amane had learned how to do basic housework, or at least enough to get along okay on his own. But he didn't think he would be able to do everything to his parents' standards, so they would just end up redoing everything in the end.

"I guess you would."

"I don't know how I feel about you agreeing with that…"

"…But you have learned enough to keep up with the everyday chores. I mean, it's far from perfect, but you can get by now."

"That's a harsh appraisal. That said, you're not wrong."

"Heh-heh. You've still got a ways to go, Amane-kun."

"Yes, yes, I'm no match for the marvelous Mahiru-san."

"I'll say."

Amane had a feeling that even if he spent his whole life working on it, he would never get as good at housework as Mahiru was now.

Mahiru laughed, a little surprised by Amane's words, and slapped his upper arm, but there wasn't any malice behind it, so he didn't complain.

"I don't know how your parents could make you live alone when you couldn't even take care of yourself, Amane-kun."

She probably hadn't meant to say that out loud—but she'd obviously been thinking it.

When they'd first met, Amane had been such a mess that even Itsuki had been worried about him. So it was no surprise Mahiru would doubt him now. She knew exactly how bad it could get.

Amane pretended not to notice the shock of pain that went through his chest and shrugged. "Actually, I don't think they ever wanted to let me out of their sight? I was a real loser with absolutely no life skills, after all."

"So it was your decision to move out on your own?"

"Yeah. Some stuff happened, and I didn't want to stay in my hometown anymore."

If he made it sound too serious, Mahiru was likely to worry, so he tried to gloss over it, attempting to keep his cool while he did.

Mahiru froze. Immediately, shades of remorse began flickering through her caramel-colored eyes. Amane hadn't meant to upset her, but Mahiru, who was particularly sensitive to other people's pain, had gotten a glimpse of the baggage he was carrying. Sometimes her insight could be troubling.

Amane regretting mentioning it in the first place. He reached out and patted Mahiru on the head as she grimaced at him.

"Ah, you really don't have to worry about it," he said. "Actually, it puts me in a tough spot if you're too worried about me. Really, it's not that big of a deal. There were just some guys in my hometown who I would rather not see again, so I left."

In reality, it hadn't been that serious. Just that something he had earnestly believed in had crumbled from its very foundation; that's all. He hadn't been physically injured or anything like that, and now that he had cut off all contact with those guys, he was living a normal life, and the dull ache of old wounds had faded into the background.

Despite what he said, Mahiru's melancholy expression didn't go away. Amane was stumped. "I'm really fine, you know?" he insisted. "If it was still painful, I wouldn't be talking about going home to visit. As far as I'm concerned, it's in the past."

"…Liar."

"Liar? Listen here—"

"If you really were over it, you wouldn't be making that face."

Mahiru trembled slightly as she extended a hand toward Amane's cheek. Her eyes were downcast, so he couldn't even see a reflection of his expression, but going off what she said, it probably wasn't anything good.

"…If you don't want to say, that's fine. But it's painful for me to see you looking so hurt."

"Don't say that. It's not that big of a deal; it's not even an interesting story, okay?" Amane insisted. "Are you still worried about it, even so?" he asked quietly, and Mahiru nodded slightly.

Amane scratched his cheek and wondered what to do. He let out a soft sigh.

"Hmm… I wonder where I should begin. Well, I guess it makes sense to start with why I wanted to leave my hometown, huh?"

"…Yes."

"It's because I wanted to get some distance from my friends…or I guess I should say from the people who I *thought* were my friends."

It didn't sound like a very good reason for moving. Anyone else would probably think he was worrying too much over something small.

And yet that time of his life was etched indelibly into Amane's memory.

"How should I put this…?" he began. "Well, I was blessed with a good home environment."

Mahiru looked a bit curious about this abrupt change in topic, but she must have understood that this was necessary to understand the full story because she listened quietly.

"I had relatives—my parents and grandparents—who loved me, and we were well-off. Financially, I mean. They let me study and do whatever I wanted. I was very lucky, and I know that."

His parents had been especially doting on him, since he was their only son, and they had raised him in a way that respected Amane's individuality.

"But at that time, I wasn't really aware of how incredibly blessed I was, and I had never learned to be suspicious of people. I was surrounded by good people and was raised with love, so to be honest, I was a really naive child."

Now Amane was sulky, but before the incident took place, he had been so honest and cheerful it was impossible to imagine, looking at him now. He had been a really childish child.

"…I think that my naïveté made me especially easy to deceive and to use."

And so there had been many openings to take advantage of him.

"The new friends I made in the first half of middle school… I don't actually know if I can honestly call them friends, but the guys who I started hanging out with… Well, to

tell the truth, they saw me as an easy mark, as a good source of money. When you come from a well-off family, it's only human for people to want to get something out of you."

It sounded pathetic to say it, but back then, Amane had been honest to a fault and incredibly gullible. In other words, he was easy to fool. He'd grown up believing in the innate goodness of others, and nothing had ever challenged that redundant naïveté. Nobody he knew would have ever tried to take advantage of him.

Mahiru's expression had grown stiff, so in order to try to relax her, Amane smiled and said, "Of course, I wasn't a total fool, so I never directly gave them any money or anything." But Mahiru's expression only got even more severe.

"And then, well, I discovered that they were saying all sorts of things behind my back. They trashed my appearance. I heard them say I was gross and that they hated me and had only ever intended to take me for all I was worth from the very beginning. I was shocked and pretty depressed for a while."

People all have different preferences when it comes to who they get along with, and Amane wouldn't have minded if they'd just said they didn't like him. But since they thought they could get something out of him, they had all smiled to his face and abused him in private, and that was something he couldn't bear.

He had told Mahiru the mild version of the story, but there had also been insults that would be difficult to repeat, so he had really endured a lot. Now he would be able to shrug off abuse like that, but at the time, he had been an earnest and sensitive boy, and it had just been too much for him to bear.

"Of course, I knew that not everybody in the world was like those guys. I had a few friends that I believe really liked me. Even so, once I started doubting people, fear took over. I couldn't trust anyone."

He had shut himself up in his room for a while and cried.

He had eventually recovered, thanks to his parents' support, but as one might expect, he was afraid to come into contact with those boys again, so he did every last possible thing to avoid them for as long as he could—

"…And so I left my hometown. I left to get a fresh start in a place where no one knew me. I left so I wouldn't be bothered by those guys anymore."

He hadn't known whether he could make it on his own, but he'd decided that his peace of mind was worth the risk.

Thanks to everything that had happened, he could no longer easily trust people like he once had and had grown into an introverted and skeptical young man who had just finally managed to make two friends after taking ages to warm up to them. Amane had to laugh at himself. For better or worse, he had become quite conservative, but at this point, that attitude was deeply ingrained, and there was no changing it now.

Amane had finished talking, and Mahiru was trembling. Her hands were balled into fists, and the emotion flickering in her eyes was unmistakably anger. Amane was surprised to see the mild-mannered Mahiru get so enraged, and then he was even more baffled when he realized that she was angry on his behalf, and that brought him a little joy.

"…If I had been there, I would have punched those awful guys right in the face."

"Please, no; you would just hurt your own hand… And you don't have to get your hands dirty for my sake, even in your imagination."

Those jerks weren't worth Mahiru getting her hands dirty—not even close. And anyway, Amane had already cut them out of his life. It would be nothing but a waste for Mahiru to even bother with them.

Mahiru relaxed a bit. She'd been squeezing her hands so hard they had started turning white. Some of the anger faded from her face, replaced by an even deeper look of sorrow.

When it came to Amane, Mahiru could be so compassionate it almost hurt. But this incident was in the past, and Amane was embarrassed to have upset her over it.

"Really, it wasn't as agonizing as your situation, so you don't have to be so sad."

"Amane-kun, it's not something that can be compared. I don't even want to try."

She cut him off flatly, and Amane frowned when he realized that had been rude, but she looked at him and put on a calm expression.

"Let me say this—it's not that there's no value in sharing our experiences, but your grief is your own, and it's something that only you can carry, and it can't be compared to my grief. Nothing is better or worse. In the truest sense, I can't understand your pain, Amane-kun, nor can you understand mine."

"…Ah."

"What I can do is accept your sadness and support you…just like you've done for me. I want to be there for you, and I want you to rely on me." Mahiru whispered this as she placed the palms of her hands against both of Amane's cheeks.

He gradually felt a heat rising from the depths of his chest and behind his eyes. "…But I already rely on you all the time," he said.

"Emotionally, I mean."

"I always rely on you."

"…Well, do it more."

"Don't spoil me, please."

"I'm going to. So, so much."

"I'm really not worth it."

“Why are you worried about that now? I’ve always known you were a hopeless case, Amane-kun.”

He felt himself grimace when she casually delivered this harsh and yet undeniable truth. But even though she sounded exasperated, Mahiru looked at him with gentle, loving eyes that communicated the opposite.

“…But I also know you’re a very good person, and you can endure a lot. Too much, even,” she continued. “You can at least let me spoil you a little.”

Her sweet whispering voice, genuine and kind, threatened to obliterate what little resistance Amane had left. He could imagine himself letting her spoil him forever, and the thought struck a deep chord of fear within him, because he knew that if he let himself grow too dependent on the girl he deeply loved, nothing would ever seem as sweet.

For the sake of preserving what little dignity he had left, Amane slowly shook his head. “Really, I’m fine,” he insisted.

Mahiru batted her eyes and sighed dramatically. “…You’re trying to act cool again,” she said wearily. “You big dummy.”

Mahiru mocked him sweetly, then slipped her hands from Amane’s cheeks around to the back of his head. And then she pulled him toward her with all her strength.

Before he could react, Amane’s face was pressed up against Mahiru’s chest. He froze. He could feel the softness of her skin and hear the beating of her heart, and when he inhaled, his lungs were filled with her sweet scent—a mix of milk and some kind of flower, with a little note of something bright, like green apple—and his mind was in utter chaos.

“Please, just let me spoil you,” she said.

“…You’re really forward” was the best answer his addled brain could muster.

But Mahiru’s shoulders trembled with laughter. “Did you just realize that? Sometimes girls can be very pushy, you know,” she whispered impishly.

Fully aware of Amane’s bewilderment, Mahiru gently wrapped her arms around his back so he couldn’t get away. Of course, she was still a slim young woman, so if Amane wanted to shake free, he probably could have. However, the sweet scent and Mahiru’s warmth, plus her pleasant softness and the calming rhythm of her heartbeat, sapped all of Amane’s willpower to defy her.

“…Besides, I’m the type of person who always repays a debt,” she whispered. Amane had to fight to keep from losing himself in her warmth. “I relied on you before, Amane-kun. You spoiled me, too, remember? And now it’s my turn, all right? Let me spoil you back. It’s the least I can do.”

“…It’s more than enough.”

“Well then… Someday, when I’m feeling down again, you can be there for me, and that will make us even.” Her tone of voice was playful, and it was clear she had no intention of giving up.

Amane surrendered at last and leaned into Mahiru. But this time, he put his arm around her back and made sure to lean against her shoulder, instead of her chest. It was the best he could do.

Mahiru smiled at Amane’s choice, then tightly embraced him and accepted his full weight.

“This isn’t right…”

Several dozen minutes had passed, though it felt like much longer for Amane. When he raised his head and pulled away from her, his voice was cold and had an edge. He wasn’t angry at Mahiru, though. He was ashamed of himself, for taking advantage of her kindness.

But Mahiru just smiled and showed no sign of concern. “Well, I do hate to see you feeling sad, so…next time I’ll try to spoil you even sooner.”

“…That’s not exactly what I meant…”

Amane caught himself glancing down at her chest again. He quickly averted his eyes. She was being so kind to him, and he didn’t want to be vulgar. He’d managed to keep himself in check this time, but next time, he thought, he might not be able to save himself so easily.

Mahiru trusted Amane. She wouldn’t have embraced him if she wasn’t comfortable with him. But he was still somewhat surprised that she was being so insistent.

And although her tenderness had eased the pain of his old wounds, that only left him free to focus on the new aching in his heart.

“Why do you always turn away from me?” Mahiru asked.

“I don’t know what to do with myself when you spoil me like that. I mean, I am a guy, after all.”

“I know that…”

“It’s not clear that you do. Like, seriously.”

She should be more careful, he thought. What if he had taken advantage of her and rubbed his face wherever he pleased? What would she have done then? He wanted her to understand that there were some lines she shouldn’t let even him cross.

He wasn’t confident he would be able to control himself the next time he was faced with the temptation of being given the go-ahead to bury his face in the chest of the

girl he loved. Amane sighed. Mahiru was too trusting and would probably forgive him for almost anything.

Mahiru's eyes narrowed. She looked absolutely hurt.

"…Amane-kun, I don't understand you at all."

"What about me?"

"Everything, all of it. You dummy."

Mahiru stood up from the sofa in an angry huff. Even her insults sounded adorable. Leaving Amane to ponder her anger, she turned away and headed for the kitchen.

He watched her leave in a daze. She looked so small and unsteady, but just a moment ago, she'd been supporting him.

"Amane-kun, you're such an airhead sometimes." She kept on rebuking him in a quiet, angry voice that she apparently didn't think he could hear, so Amane just watched her go with a shrug and a smile—

"Even though I wouldn't do that for anyone but you."

And then his ears picked up another quiet grumble.

His breath caught in his throat.

For a second, his brain refused to process her words. It was so shocking to him.

He forced himself to take a shallow breath.

And then the intense surge of emotion swirling in his chest practically forced Amane to his feet. He found himself reaching out toward her.

"…Hey, Mahiru?"

"What is…it?"

Before she could turn around, Amane had wrapped Mahiru up in his arms, embracing her tightly as though he were shielding her from the world. Mahiru's slender frame began to tremble, and her voice wavered, but she didn't push him away or seem upset. He could tell she was shaking with surprise.

Amane wrapped his arms around her delicate body. Just a moment ago, she had been supporting him. Now he put his chin on top of her head so she couldn't turn around.

"…You didn't mind hugging from the front, but now that it's from behind, you're spooked," Amane teased.

"Anyone would be surprised by being hugged so suddenly!"

"You're the one who said I could lean on you. Though I held back because I knew this would happen… It's bad for my heart."

Amane hadn't meant for this to happen. He was going to let Mahiru go off and pout, but when he'd heard what she'd said, he felt a sudden surge of emotion, embarrassment, and elation all at once, and reason left him—and his body had sought out Mahiru of its own accord.

Gently, yet tightly, like he didn't want to let her slip away, he held on to Mahiru, who felt like she might shatter if he squeezed too hard.

Mahiru tried to wriggle her way around to face him, but Amane whispered into her ear, "Don't turn around."

She hung her head. Her face was bright red, and he heard her mutter, "…You dummy."

…I am a dummy; you're absolutely right.

He couldn't deny it. Here he was, taking advantage of her kindness in a vulnerable moment… He was certainly a bad person.

But Mahiru hadn't pulled away from his touch, and he was grateful for that at least. He enjoyed her warmth as he pressed his face into her hair, just as she had done to him earlier, when she was trying to get him to accept her generosity. The difference between then and now, Amane thought, was that he knew how she would respond.

"Now do you understand how I was feeling before?" he asked.

"I—I do, but—"

The shrillness in her voice told him she was upset. Her ears were red, and even though he couldn't actually tell from this angle, Amane had no doubt that her face had also turned the same intense color.

Even Amane understood he had done something bad. He'd only done this because he had been sure she wouldn't turn him down.

"…Um, so look. You really don't need to worry so much about me," he said. "It's not like I'm dying from some terrible condition or something. And besides, I can be pretty shameless, so if you spoil me too much, I'll end up taking advantage of your kindness."

Mahiru listened quietly to Amane's words, then let out a sigh. "…If you find it satisfying, if it helps heal you, then I'm not going to refuse a hug."

She reached up with one hand and gently touched him on the arm. She didn't brush him away or smack him; she simply placed her hand gently on his arm, as if to draw him closer. Amane warned himself not to get too carried away, but he still pressed his face into Mahiru's hair again.

"I'm a crafty guy, you know. I knew you would accept the burden, so I started relying on you."

"What are you talking about? I've always known you're trouble."

Amane knew his recent actions had stemmed from his own cowardice, but he wasn't quite sure what she meant by *trouble*.

"…I feel like there's something you want to say to me…"

"Yes, if you have any self-awareness at all, then it's time to shape up and fly right. My heart really can't take any more of this."

"I really don't have a clue what you're talking about," Amane protested.

"Mm-hmm," Mahiru hummed, then slapped Amane on the arm. It didn't hurt, and he laughed quietly at her playful attack.

"I'm sorry for being so much trouble."

"…Well, if you're going to be trouble anyway, you might as well go all the way."

"But… What you were saying earlier…"

"That was that, and this is this."

"Oh…?"

He wasn't sure what Mahiru meant, but she certainly seemed to have something in mind, so far be it from Amane to argue.

If Mahiru thought he seemed troublesome, then he probably was. But he didn't know how to respond when she told him to up the ante.

"I can be crafty, too, you know," Mahiru said. "So I suppose I really don't have much room to complain."

"In what way, Mahiru?"

"Hmm, I wonder?"

He felt her body tremble slightly with laughter.

"If you haven't realized yet that I also have a few tricks up my sleeve, you still have a long way to go, Amane-kun."

Even though Amane couldn't see her face, it was clear she was laughing gleefully. Gracefully, she slipped out of his arms and whirled around to face him.

Her expression when she did was vibrant, and mischievous, and tender, and sweet—a lovely and beautiful smile that would enchant anyone who saw it. Amane was speechless.

When she saw Amane like that, Mahiru seemed satisfied, and she turned and headed for the kitchen in her usual high spirits.

Amane watched her leave the room and then collapsed onto the sofa.

…You're a big dummy, too, you know.

What was she trying to do, flashing him a look like that? He didn't think he could string together the words to ask her. All he could do was sit there, grumbling quietly.

But the pain in the depths of his chest was gone.

Chapter 12

Parental Concern and a Passing Pain

"…Mom, you can't just send Mahiru photos like that."

On the last day of Golden Week, Amane phoned his mother.

He was ostensibly calling to ask whether she would be at home on Mother's Day, but before he could do that, he felt the need to stress his objection to her going behind his back to send Mahiru photos of him. Nothing disastrous had slipped through the cracks just yet, but this was his mother he was dealing with, and he knew if Mahiru asked, she would absolutely send something mortifying.

So Amane rushed through the typical greetings and right into sullenly hurling accusations.

"Uh-oh, you caught me," his mother replied in an indifferent tone.

She definitely was not remorseful.

"Mahiru was acting suspicious, so I questioned her, and then I saw the photos."

"Mahiru really needs to work on her poker face, huh?"

"Say you're sorry for sending them."

Thanks to Shihoko, Mahiru's image folder was full of all kinds of strange pictures, and he was worried what else might make its way to her. For some reason, Mahiru seemed to enjoy the photos, and rather than forcing her to stop looking at them, he had decided it would be faster to go right to the root of the problem.

But his mother didn't seem the least bit ashamed. "What's so wrong about sending photos of my adorable son to my adorable future daughter-in-law?"

"I don't even know where to start correcting everything wrong with that sentence… Anyway, don't send stuff I haven't okayed."

"So if I get your permission, it's fine, right? The photos made Mahiru-chan very happy, you know."

"At least give me a chance to choose which ones you can send. I'd die if I found out you'd sent anything embarrassing."

"Don't worry, I won't send any pictures of you in the bath."

“If you do, I’m boycotting Mother’s Day.” Amane scowled at his smartphone as he delivered his ultimatum. His mother wasn’t on hand to feel his wrath directly, so that would have to do.

She obviously did not appreciate how upset he was, because she laughed gaily at his demand. Before Amane could raise his eyebrows and go off on her again, she added, “One way or another, you always show your appreciation for me every year, don’t you?”

When Amane heard that, he held back his complaints.

“…I mean, yeah, you’re my mom.”

Of course, she could be irritating and obstinate, and sometimes he got completely fed up with her, but his mother had carried him in her belly, given birth to him, lovingly raised him to be healthy—and she did it all with plenty of love, so naturally he was grateful to her.

Thanks to his parents, Amane had grown up okay and had rebounded whenever he’d gotten hurt. He had turned out a little sulky, though.

But since it was embarrassing for a young man of his age to express gratitude directly to his mother’s face, he faltered a little.

His mother laughed cheerfully, as if she could see straight through her son. “It makes a mother happy to see that she’s raised a good child. I’m looking forward to this year’s flowers.”

“…Yeah.”

“Also, make sure you invite Mahiru-chan here for the summer, okay? I’m looking forward to it.”

His mother was obviously excited for his homecoming.

“Got it,” Amane replied curtly, and he was treated to another laugh. “Well, Mahiru wants to come anyway,” he continued. “It seems like she’s looking forward to it as well.”

“It sounds like you are, too, Amane.”

“Oh, be quiet.”

He was excited about the prospect of spending the summer with Mahiru, but he didn’t appreciate being teased about it by his own mother.

Suddenly, Amane was in a bad mood, but Shihoko didn’t seem to notice. On the other end of the line, he could hear the peals of her cheerful laughter.

“Heh-heh. That’s great. It sounds like you’re okay with the idea of returning home.”

“…I guess so.”

She was probably thinking of the summer after his first year away, when he had resisted going home during the break.

Now Amane was more positive about going home than he had once been. It wasn't that he had forgotten the past. Even though he had experienced certain hardships, he could see now that it had probably been for the best. Things were much better than they would have been if he had stayed so trusting and good-natured, thus inevitably exploited for all he was worth. More importantly, if he hadn't escaped those guys, he never would have met Mahiru.

"If I let what happened derail my life any more than it already has, Mahiru would kill me. So yeah, it pretty much doesn't bother me anymore."

"You told Mahiru-chan?"

"Yeah."

"That's wonderful. That's one more person who really understands you."

His mother sounded very happy, and Amane felt his chest grow just a little bit warm.

"…Sure."

"So that must mean those photos of you from middle school I had held back on sending are fair game. I've got one from when you hit your growth spurt. You looked so smug because you'd gotten taller than me. And that's just the beginning!"

"Hey, listen, I'm not kidding. Cut it out, all right? You've got some awful stuff in reserve."

All the warm feelings he'd had toward his mother evaporated.

"But you were so cuuute!"

"Dammit. This time, when I come home, I'm taking those out of the album."

"I've got that album hidden," Shihoko countered. "So they'll be fine."

"I'm definitely going to find it," he insisted.

He had to dispose of the photos before Mahiru saw them. He could just imagine Mahiru grinning as she told him what she thought of them after his mother smuggled them into her hands behind his back.

He could hear Shihoko laughing at him on the other end of the line, and with a curt good-bye, he hung up on her, sighing angrily.

"…What are you doing?" a quiet voice asked. He turned to see Mahiru, peeking inquisitively at him from the living room door. It looked like she had heard him talking and tried not to make any noise as she entered the apartment.

Amane averted his eyes. "I was talking to my mom, telling her how I've decided to completely destroy her photo albums. Scorched earth."

"Wh-what do you mean?! That'd be awful!" she exclaimed. She sat down next to him in an angry huff and jabbed him in the shoulder.

Amane grimaced. "What are you even hoping to see, Mahiru…?"

“Photos of you, from long ago, of course…”

“No way.”

“…You see? I have no choice but to get them from Shihoko-san, behind your back.”

“Hey, listen—”

“I’m just joking. Well, half joking anyway.”

“Geez… It’s the other half that worries me, you know.”

Amane couldn’t help but feel like if he dropped the matter, Mahiru would end up plotting something with his mother behind his back. On the other hand, Mahiru was a good person, and he trusted that, whatever happened, she wouldn’t do anything too outrageous.

Amane sighed dramatically, but Mahiru didn’t seem bothered by it. Instead, she smiled broadly, looking pleased. “…I don’t think you’re going to like this much, but I’m really looking forward to summer vacation.”

“You’re kinda early,” Amane replied. “Golden Week isn’t even over yet.”

“Well… I’m looking forward to seeing your mother and father again, and I can’t wait to check out your photo album, and I really want to see the place where you grew up with my own eyes.”

Amane felt his heart leap as she adorably rattled off her list, but she had added in one item too many.

“Thanks…except for the album thing. The album is off-limits.”

Mahiru gave him a peevish look when he shut her down, so he stroked her head to distract her from the existence of the cursed photo album.

Mahiru apparently liked having her head stroked more than he had ever expected. She still looked a tiny bit dissatisfied, but when he gently touched the top layer of her hair, careful not to mess it up, she quickly settled down.

“…I’m looking forward to going home, too,” Amane admitted.

“Really?” she asked.

“Why would I lie about that?”

“…I mean, with everything that happened…” Mahiru hesitated, probably recalling what he had revealed to her yesterday.

“That thing with those guys doesn’t really bother me anymore. Just the fact that you’re upset about something that happened to me really means a lot. How do I put this—? I think I’m a pretty lucky guy to have someone who’s willing to get genuinely angry on my behalf.”

He knew it was a small, simple thing, but just having someone who listened to him talk about those old wounds—and be there to support him—had already gone a long way toward helping him heal.

Besides, it was clear he couldn't carry on being depressed about it. Sooner or later, he would exhaust Mahiru's patience with him, and he didn't want her to think he was completely hopeless.

"It's only natural that I would be angry you were hurt, Amane-kun. I mean, if someone was to hurt me, you would be angry, right?"

"Of course I would."

"So it's the same thing," Mahiru asserted softly, letting her eyes drift closed. Amane could tell how much she enjoyed it when he stroked her hair.

Amane felt a little embarrassed by how much she trusted him, but he continued gently caressing her, and she smiled graciously and leaned against him.

Chapter 13

A Premonition of Trouble After the Holidays

Golden Week, which had seemed both very long and painfully short, eventually came to a close, and school began again.

...Finally, I can get some distance from Mahiru.

Mahiru had spent nearly the entire Golden Week at Amane's apartment. He'd said it was okay, was grateful she had made their delicious meals, and was happy to spend time with the girl he loved.

But ever since the day Amane had told Mahiru about his troubled past, his feelings for her had only grown, and now he found it almost impossible to calm his turbulent emotions.

Mahiru trusted Amane wholeheartedly. She spoiled him, certainly, but in a way she also took advantage of him, testing the limits of his emotional fortitude. And knowing he was the only one allowed to touch her sent his feelings into overdrive.

Really, he thought, *I deserve some kind of award for self-control. If only I didn't have to hold back, I bet I could ask her out. I might even get a good answer—*

Mahiru had been so accepting of Amane, but he knew he didn't have the guts to tell her how he felt. Just the thought of her rejection made him want to curl up and die. He knew he was a coward, too afraid to make a move. But perhaps he was even more afraid of what might happen if she didn't reject him, if by some chance she felt the same way about him. He didn't think he was good enough to be her boyfriend.

...I've got a lot of work to do.

There wasn't anything he could do about his face, but he wanted to improve himself wherever he could—physically and mentally. At least enough so no one would talk behind their backs when he was with her—enough so Mahiru wouldn't be ashamed of being with him.

And even if it turned out Mahiru didn't like him that way, it didn't hurt to try. He'd never get anywhere if he didn't give it his best.

As he made up his mind to ask Yuuta, the lean, athletic track-and-field star, for some training recommendations, Amane passed through the school gates and reached the shoe lockers, where he caught sight of a familiar face.

"Mornin'…" Itsuki was groggily changing into his indoor slippers. He gave a puzzled frown when he saw Amane. "…What's with that face?"

"That's my line," Amane said. "And anyway, what face?"

"Well, umm… How do I put this? You look like you've made a big decision. You finally decide to tell her how you feel?"

Amane gave Itsuki an incredulous look. "Hmph. Yeah, right!" But his friend hadn't been that far off the mark.

Itsuki stared at him with genuine curiosity. "Huh, well then, what is it? I thought there would have been some kind of progress by now."

"P-progress? All right, look—"

"I was sure you'd finally grown a pair and decided to approach her like a man for a change."

"Damn, no need to be an ass! Anyway… I was just thinking about how I have a lot of work to do if I'm ever gonna get her to like me back."

"Hmm. In other words, over the break, after we went to karaoke…something did happen! You're really going for it, eh?!" Itsuki chuckled.

Amane couldn't think of a clever comeback.

Itsuki slapped his friend on the back as he laughed. "Well, I know you hate me prying, so I'll let you off the hook… But if there's anything I can help you with, I will, okay?"

"Itsuki…"

"And we can think about double dates, okay?"

"Ah, so that's what you're really after," Amane joked. He knew Itsuki was only trying to lighten the mood.

Itsuki cackled and smacked Amane's back again. "Yeah, that's the dream, huh…?" Humor was Itsuki's way of cheering him up.

Amane smiled at his friend, feeling just a little bit more optimistic. "Whatever you say, man."

When Amane and Itsuki reached their classroom, there was some kind of clamor going on. The commotion wasn't directed at the two of them, but the lively atmosphere was so different from normal that Amane couldn't hide his bewilderment.

After a long break, it was normal for the classroom to be bustling with stories of vacation, but today it was filled with a different kind of noise—the bustle of people

passing rumors. Amane strained his ears to listen in as he unloaded his bags at his seat—and it seemed they were all discussing Mahiru.

"I heard that Shiina-san went on a date the other day with a cool-looking guy!"

What he overheard made Amane's cheek twitch violently.

They'd gone to crowded places, so there had always been a possibility that someone would see them. But Amane had never imagined it would literally become the talk of the classroom. He didn't mind the part about looking cool, but the rest of it immediately set him on edge.

Itsuki had obviously overheard the same thing and was sitting there doing a very bad job of not smiling. Amane would have liked to give him a good punch in the arm.

As they whispered about the rumors, all the girls kept glancing over at Mahiru.

"I heard they were strolling around arm in arm, and she was wearing a smile no one's ever seen at school before… It must have been the guy everyone was talking about at the start of the year."

"She says she's not dating anyone, but there's no doubt now…"

Mahiru, who had come to school early, as always, was preparing for first period. She either didn't realize the rumors were about her, or more likely, she did realize and was trying to ignore them.

She had to be used to the attention, thanks to her beauty and grace, but that day there were more than the usual number of eyes peering in her direction, filled with questions. And aside from the curious stares of the girls, she was getting looks of dead despair from the boys.

If it bothered Mahiru, she certainly didn't show it. She stubbornly maintained her usual angelic demeanor.

Eventually, a few of the girls in the class couldn't contain their curiosity any longer and gingerly approached her.

"Hey, hey, Shiina-san?" one of the girls asked timidly.

Mahiru slowly batted her eyes. "Yes, did you need something?" She was acting like she had no idea what the girls wanted.

"Well, the other day, I think I saw you walking through the shopping mall with a guy."

"Yes, I did walk through the mall," Mahiru confirmed.

A wave of murmuring went through the class. Obviously, everyone had been wondering if the rumors were true. Amane, at the center of the scandal, felt sick to his stomach.

"Um, so that guy… What kind of relationship…?"

“What kind of relationship do we have?” Mahiru interrupted. “Well, if I had to say, I think calling us *friends* would describe it best.”

Amane was glad Mahiru had answered honestly, but his stomach still felt like it was tied in knots. His classmates continued to mutter among themselves. He wished they would all just mind their own business, but there was little he could do about it. Several of the other boys in class seemed very relieved by Mahiru’s answer, undoubtedly for different reasons than Amane.

“So it wasn’t a date or anything?”

“A date…?” Mahiru thought for a moment. “Well, when I consider the definition of a date, I think it counts.”

It was not the answer he had been expecting. In the strictest sense, a date was when two or more people picked a place and time to meet up, so she wasn’t exactly wrong… But it was pretty obvious that was not what the girls had meant.

The small crowd shrieked as their excitement peaked.

From Amane’s perspective, it seemed like since time immemorial, girls loved getting excited about other people’s love affairs. Normally he didn’t concern himself with that kind of chatter, figuring it was just what girls did. But this time, he couldn’t ignore their gossip—because he was at the center of it.

“S-so what are you saying…?”

The same girl who had asked the previous questions inquired again. Her voice trembled with a mix of curiosity and hope.

Mahiru glanced at Amane for a split second. That look, gentle but filled with hints of passion, left him momentarily breathless. By the time he got ahold of himself, Mahiru had already turned away.

Now Mahiru wore a gentle smile, full of warmth and affection, and clasped her hands in front of her breast, as if she were tightly holding on to something very precious. Her answer sent the class into chaos, and it shook Amane to his core.

“We’re not dating, but to me…he is the most important person on earth.”

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book.

My name is Saekisan. I am the author. I trust you enjoyed Volume 3 of *The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten*.

As I told you in the afterword to the previous volume, this book is the one where Mahiru changes it up and becomes a little bit devilish. In Volume 3, I tried to show her taking a more active role.

Apparently, she understood that if she didn't make an effort to push, nothing would ever happen, so she really went all out to manipulate Amane, but Amane didn't give in. She was really proactive, but in the end, it was no good. She couldn't make it happen, oh no!

Even so, Amane has chosen to move forward in his own way and is doing his best, so if you would be so kind as to enjoy the two of them becoming tantalizingly closer, I would be most glad.

That's because I'm planning to have Amane take a more proactive role in the next volume as well! Come on, Amane, show us your manliness!

Besides that, we once again have some very cute illustrations by Hanekoto. What did you all think? Aren't they just too cute? Our angel really is angelic; that much is clear.

All the illustrations are so cute I'm at a loss for words, but personally, I think the ones of Mahiru looking embarrassed are the cutest. Huh? She looks embarrassed in most of them…? Must be because of Amane, huh…?

In other words, they're all adorable.

Take another look, everyone.

I'm really looking forward to the illustrations for the next volume… And I've got to believe there will be another one!

Well then, we've come to the end, but I must thank everyone who has looked after me.

To those of you who have worked so hard to get this book published—the head editors, everyone in the GA Novels editing department, everyone in the sales department, the proofreaders, Hanekoto, everyone at the printers—and to all of you who picked up a copy of this book—sincerely, thank you all.

I shall lay down my pen here and pray we can meet again in the next volume.

Thank you for enjoying my book to the very end!